

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR."

ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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PRISONERS OF SILENCE.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

"CONNIE, you can't wear the lace on your yellow dress again. I said so last time you had it on. What are you going to do about it?"

Mrs. Vallotson had brought her vigorous presence into the dining-room for the express purpose of asking the question, and she paused for the answer just inside the door. It was only half-past ten in the morning, but the July day was already very hot; and Constance, the only occupant of the room, was sitting by the table, with some needlework before her, in a rather listless attitude. It was an attitude—as it was an occupation—which the Constance of two years before would utterly have scouted; but the Constance of two years before seemed to have undergone considerable modification in the interval. The alert air of superiority had degenerated into an expression of supercilious dissatisfaction; the assured self-confidence into a resentful and enforced quiescence. Constance had entered the lists with her mother on the subject of the regeneration of Alnchester. She had come off conquered instead of conqueror, and the low opinion which she had consequently found herself obliged to form of her mother's intellect by no means militated against—or sweetened—her enforced realisation of her mother's strength of character. Defeat and enforced idleness are naturally trying to an individual who feels that the world is the worse for her inaction. Moreover, one may

be clearly aware of the impossibility of regarding a certain friend in any other than a friendly light, and yet one may find life a trifle the duller for that friend's absence.

During the month which had preceded Bryan Armitage's departure from Alnchester, Constance had snubbed him, ignored him, and quarrelled with him; loftily consigning to oblivion the question and answer which had passed between them at that ball, on which so many results had ensued. But it was not to be denied, nevertheless, that since then Constance had grown a little thin and pale.

She took up her work as Mrs. Vallotson spoke, and shook her head indifferently.

If time had not dealt very kindly with Constance, it seemed to have laid a rather invigorating than depressing finger upon her mother. Mrs. Vallotson had risen from her illness of two years ago with some such change upon her as might have been apparent in a woman who had passed through an acute crisis, either physical or mental. It would have been difficult to say—such characteristics having always been so pronounced in her—that she was harder, more dominating, more assured; but her whole personality seemed to have become accentuated. She had aged, Alnchester said, perceptibly; but it was the age that ingrains and confirms, and in no sense the age that relaxes or enfeebles.

As she stood now, looking down at her daughter, the alteration in her personality, which thus made itself vaguely apparent in her general manner and demeanour, was just traceable in her face. Her hair had grown grey, and there were lines about her eyes. But the eyes themselves were keen, and even peremptory, in their commanding glance. There were lines about the mouth, but they in no wise interfered

with the unconscious air of material well-being which was the dominant expression of the whole countenance.

She scanned her daughter's languid figure, and then spoke decidedly.

"Come, rouse yourself, child," she said. "You must wear the dress this evening, and something must be done to it first."

"It's too hot for concerts," said the girl, with weary superciliousness.

She was engaged to go that evening to a concert with some friends in the town.

"It's not the most sensible way of spending a July evening," returned her mother.

"I told you that when you accepted. But, as you have accepted, of course you must go. Black lace would look nice after all that white. That friend of Mrs Elliott's had a very pretty dress trimmed with black lace."

"I don't like black lace, mother."

"Have you anything else to propose? No? Then I don't see that you've any alternative, and there's no time to lose. I'm going down into the town. Go and put on your hat, and I'll go with you to buy it. The walk will do you good."

Constance hesitated a moment, and then she rose listlessly. She had come to the conclusion that it was undignified to argue about trifles. It was a conclusion which was less acutely painful to her than a recognition of the fact that the weight of her mother's determination, even in trifles, was not to be resisted.

She made no attempt, however, to conclude her preparations for her walk with any despatch. She dawdled and dreamed until she found herself quite surprised at receiving no call, more or less peremptory. She went downstairs, and coming from the dining-room she met the housemaid, hurried and subdued. Constance pushed open the dining-room door and went in.

Mrs. Vallotson was still in her indoor dress. The second post had arrived, and beside her on the table lay an open letter. She turned abruptly as Constance entered.

"Oh, you're ready, child!" she said shortly. "That's all right. You'll have to do my commission for me. I shan't be able to come out."

"Why not, mother?"

"There's a letter from North. He is coming down this evening to stay until to-morrow."

The statement was as brief as possible, and it sounded even more curt than it was by reason of the sharp note which had appeared in Mrs. Vallotson's voice. A slight darkness and disturbance had fallen

upon her face, and she moved across to the writing-table as Constance exclaimed:

"Coming down! How surprising! One would have thought that he had forgotten our very existence!"

The girl spoke rather tartly; she was in no mood to approve of any action on the part of any of her fellow-creatures; and her mother's statement contained for her the very casual and hurried fulfilment by North of a long-deferred duty. She paused a moment for a mental amplification of her unfavourable criticism of him, and then observing that her mother was making a list of her requirements, she said:

"But I don't see why North's coming should keep you at home this morning, mother. There's surely nothing to do but to tell Sarah to get the spare bedroom ready!"

"I must see that it is properly done," was the curt response. "The room will have to be thoroughly turned out. Make haste now, Connie. The things from the greengrocer's are wanted this morning."

The spare room, like every other corner in Mrs. Vallotson's house, was always in spotless order. Constance was quite convinced that a guest could have been ushered in on a very few moments' notice. But she was also quite convinced that, if her mother had decided to make a day's work of the preparation for North's arrival, expostulation was waste of time. She therefore departed on her errands; her listlessness somewhat dissipated by the stimulus which her critical faculty had received. Even her engagement for the evening had acquired an interest in her eyes. It was very well that North should understand that the whole household was not to be at his beck and call at a moment's notice.

The servants came to the conclusion, during the course of a morning's work severely superintended by their mistress, that Mrs. Vallotson was not "best pleased at Dr. Branstons coming down so unexpected"; and that that was the reason why she was making such a "turn out" about the preparations for his reception. And Dr. Vallotson, when the fact of North's prospective arrival was laid before him at luncheon, found himself rather perplexed as to his point of view with reference thereto.

Personally Dr. Vallotson was rather pleased than otherwise. His dislike for North had been an affair of habit, created originally he hardly knew how, fostered by their business relation. But now that the

young man was no longer a daily thorn in his flesh, Dr. Vallotson was vaguely aware that North was a successful man, and was by no means blind to that reflected light with which the connections of a successful man may shine. For his own part, therefore, he was ready to receive his visitor with cordiality, and to express satisfaction in the prospect of his arrival.

It was, however, an indirect testimony to the increase of power about Mrs. Vallotson, that her husband, while he grew increasingly pompous and self-satisfied in his relation with the world at large, seemed to grow correspondingly meeker in his relation with his wife. He was loth to commit himself, now, without a lead, and in the brief words in which the communication was made to him he looked for a lead in vain.

"Coming down for a night?" he said majestically, but with entirely non-committal emphasis. "Really? Dear me, it is a long time since we saw him!"

"Yes."

The response was monosyllabic, but since it was entirely destitute of expression it certainly contained no reprobation, and Dr. Vallotson took courage.

"You have been making preparations for his arrival, my dear?" he said. "It seems almost a pity that he cannot stay a little longer, doesn't it? He is a busy man, though; a busy man and a very successful man, too."

"So it seems."

It was the same dry, inexpressive tone, and Dr. Vallotson shook his head dubiously.

"Ah!" he observed sententiously. "He learned a great deal under me—a great deal more than he is aware of, I've no doubt. Well!" Dr. Vallotson's voice took a tolerant tone. "We shall be glad to see him. We shall be glad to see him."

Without answering her husband, Mrs. Vallotson turned abruptly to Constance.

"Connie," she said, "you must send a note to say that you won't be able to go to the concert to-night."

Constance started indignantly.

"Why not, mother?" she asked argumentatively. "Because of North? Really, I don't see why that should keep me at home! He should have given us longer notice."

"I can't help that!" returned her mother harshly. "As he is only to be here one night, of course you must be at home."

"But, mother, I don't want——"

Lunch was over, and Mrs. Vallotson rose.

"Don't argue, Constance!" she said. "I wish you to stop at home!"

She might be compelled to stop at home, or rather she might decline to contest the point; but, that North should quite understand her opinion of his sudden visit, the girl was all the more determined. She had not known, indeed, until she sat down to write the note which her mother dictated to her, how utterly she condemned the bad form of his proceedings. She established herself in her own room, determined to deny herself afternoon tea—in time for which function North was expected—and to appear only at dinner.

But Constance had reckoned without her host. At about a quarter past four the parlour-maid knocked at her door. Her mistress had sent her, she said, to ask when Miss Vallotson was coming down. Miss Vallotson had rather a headache, it appeared, and was not coming down. The servant departed, but she returned almost immediately. Her mistress said Miss Vallotson was to come down at once, please. Miss Vallotson hesitated for a moment, and then with her small pointed chin in the air she descended.

Mrs. Vallotson was sitting alone in the drawing-room. She did not even look up as the girl came in, taking her appearance, under the circumstances, as the merest matter of course. Constance crossed the room and sat down by the open window without a word. A quarter of an hour passed in unbroken silence. Then Mrs. Vallotson deliberately folded her work, and laid it on the table.

Constance had heard nothing; but the next instant the door opened, and Dr. Vallotson and North Branston came in together.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE evening was nearly over. North Branston was standing on the hearthrug, a transitory position into which an abrupt movement had carried him some minutes before, facing Dr. Vallotson, who was favouring him with a pompous recital of a civic difficulty. Rather behind North sat Mrs. Vallotson, knitting steadily, as she had been doing for the last hour and a half. Constance was established at the extreme end of the room, apparently absorbed in the intricacies of a piece of embroidery.

Except for certain little contemptuous lights which came and went about his mouth, North's countenance was as impassive as a man's may be. His pose, as

he stood leaning one shoulder against the mantelpiece, was indifferently attentive, and a trifle constrained.

He had been five hours in Dr. Vallotson's house, and before the first five minutes had passed he had been aware that his visit was a futility and a mistake. How and by what means the consciousness had been brought home to him, he hardly knew or cared to know. Dr. Vallotson had received him with a pompous effusiveness for which he had not been prepared, and which had as little effect upon him as had the freezing demeanour of Constance.

Mrs. Vallotson's reception of him had been characterised by just that measure of stiff civility that she would have accorded to a stranger. She had spoken little, seeming to impose upon herself of set purpose a rigid neutrality of demeanour. It seemed to be even in spite of herself that her contact with North Branston created as of old an atmosphere of constraint and unexpressed antagonism, and it was in spite of himself that North Branston realised that atmosphere. He had been resisting its influence all the evening, sneering at the oppression it produced in him, sneering at the bitter sense of frustration of which he was conscious. Urged by the cynical half contempt that was his most prominent sensation, he had roused himself to talk cleverly and flippantly. But as he stood now with his eyes absently fixed on Dr. Vallotson, he was intensely conscious of the silent woman's figure seated a little behind him, motionless save for the incessant movement of the hands.

At the sound of her voice he started slightly, and turned his head involuntarily, though Dr. Vallotson was still speaking. Mrs. Vallotson was not addressing him, however. Constance at the other end of the room was placing her work materials in the little silk bag that hung on her frame, and her mother spoke to her in a low but rather sharply-pitched voice.

"What are you putting your things away for, Constance?" she said. "Are you going to bed?"

Constance had finished her preparations, and she rose as she answered, speaking like her mother in a low tone, that seemed to shut out the two men, and isolate the mother and daughter in a mutual confidence.

"Yes, mother," she said. "It's half-past ten."

The quick movement of Mrs. Vallotson's hands was suspended for a moment. She glanced at the clock, and then at her

daughter, intending apparently to utter an imperious objection.

Then she hesitated. Her expression changed; she fastened her knitting needles securely into her ball of wool and rose abruptly.

"Very well," she said. "We will both go."

In spite of the undertone in which this dialogue had been carried on, Dr. Vallotson's flow of speech had faltered on his wife's first word, and now, as Mrs. Vallotson and her daughter turned towards them, the two men met them in silence.

"Constance and I are going to say good-night," said Mrs. Vallotson formally. "You and North will like to smoke, of course."

She addressed her husband, but it was North who answered. Constance, with her most dignified demeanour, had moved forward to say good-night to him, and as he just touched the hand that she held out to him, he said:

"I won't detain Constance for a moment. But if you can wait a little, Adelaide, I should like to speak to you."

Mrs. Vallotson paused, facing him across Constance's small dark head. For an instant their eyes met, and an odd shudder ran through him; one of those strange and unaccountable jarrings of the nerves which make the old superstition as to a footstep on the waiting grave so comprehensible. Then with a tacit movement of assent Mrs. Vallotson deliberately reseated herself. North waited in silence while Constance bade her father good-night, and conveyed her superior presence out of the room. Then he turned to Mrs. Vallotson.

Before he could speak, however, Mrs. Vallotson forestalled him. She was sitting very erect, one clenched hand lying on the table beside her.

"Robert," she said harshly, "I don't imagine that North's communication, whatever it may be, is likely to interest you. His private affairs needn't trouble you. You may as well go on to the smoking-room."

Dr. Vallotson hesitated, and looked dubiously towards North. There was that in his wife's tone which made it distinctly undesirable that he should remain; but within his own breast there was a lively curiosity that made it distinctly undesirable that he should withdraw. Before he could commit himself, however, North Branston interposed.

"My private affairs need trouble no one, thank you, Adelaide," he said; "and if Dr. Vallotson will wait half a minute, I will go

with him to the smoking-room. I only wanted to tell you that I am engaged to be married, and that my wedding will take place in about six weeks."

He had made the communication in quite other tones and in other words than those which he had intended. Spoken as he had spoken it now, it had assumed the character of an uncompromising defiance. But its effect upon Mrs. Vallotson was hardly such as might have been expected. With so sharp a turn of her head, and so strange a change in her eyes, as seemed in some odd way to convey the exclamation that she did not utter, she looked from her husband to North Branston. She gazed at the latter in silence for about a moment, and then her clenched hand slowly relaxed.

"You are engaged to be married!" she said slowly. "To be married!"

"I am really delighted to hear it," said Dr. Vallotson, with tentative effusion. "Delighted, indeed! In our profession, my dear boy, a man ought to marry. It's positively necessary that he should marry if he is to attain any position. I hope you've done as well for yourself in this as in other ways."

Mrs. Vallotson had paused, and her husband's speech had filled up an apparent gap in the conversation; but neither his wife nor North took the faintest notice of him.

They were not looking at one another. Mrs. Vallotson was looking straight before her, and North was gloomily regarding the carpet at his feet; but each seemed to be oblivious of any other presence than the other's.

"Have you been engaged long?" said Mrs. Vallotson.

"Two days," returned North.

"And you are to be married?"

"In about six weeks," said North.

There was another pause, and this time Dr. Vallotson did not attempt to fill it in. Then Mrs. Vallotson rose, resting one hand rather heavily on the table. She looked straight at North, and in her face there was an extraordinary blending of the old repulsion with a strange, unconscious softening.

"I hope you will be happy," she said slowly.

With a quick involuntary movement, moved he hardly knew why or how, North Branston crossed the space that divided them, and caught her hand.

"Thank you, Adelaide," he said, a little hoarsely.

She had drawn her hand away from him, and was turning almost unconsciously as it

seemed towards the door, when Dr. Vallotson's voice broke the moment's silence:

"And who is the lady?" he said, with pompous suavity. "You haven't told us that yet. Who is the lady?"

Mrs. Vallotson, close to the door, paused and turned back.

"Yes," she said. "What is her name?"

North moved abruptly. A dull red flush crept over his forehead.

"You know the name," he said. "You know her personally. I don't know whether it will surprise you or not, but I'm going to marry Sir William Karslake's widow."

What the sound was that turned them simultaneously towards the door; whether it was a hoarse cry, a stifled groan, or merely a terrible inarticulate rattle in the throat, neither of the two men ever knew. Looking towards the door, they saw Mrs. Vallotson recoiled against it, one hand clutching at the handle, the other dropped nerveless at her side, staring at North Branston with eyes that stood out wide and burning from a drawn and livid face.

Before either man could speak, almost before they had fully realised the change which had come upon her, with an effort of will so tremendous that its action seemed to turn her face into a stone mask, Mrs. Vallotson regained her self-command. She stood there motionless, still gazing at North Branston, but a singular haze seemed to have fallen over her burning eyes.

"Have you kept up with that woman ever since you left Alnchester?" she said.

Her voice was dull and toneless, like the voice of a woman walking in her sleep.

North Branston's lips tightened and his eyes gleamed ominously. His voice as he responded was rigidly measured and self-controlled.

"Adelaide," he said, "I don't want to quarrel with you. I came down with quite another end in view. But you must be careful what you say. You made a mistake eighteen months ago; you said things I don't care to remember. Don't go back on them."

"Was there an understanding between you before her husband died?"

She had spoken in precisely the same expressionless tone, but as she finished her own words seemed to rouse her. Ghostly grey shadows had gathered about her mouth, and as she put up her hand and pushed the grey hair from her temples, on which there stood great drops of moisture, her hand was shaking like a leaf. She moved with abrupt, uncertain steps, and sat

down heavily. She did not look at North, whose face was darkened, on her words, into the rigidity of unutterable contempt.

"You cannot marry her," she said.

The atmosphere which had weighted the whole evening had developed itself at last; developed and declared itself. It seemed to rise and fill the room like a tangible blackness, a fitting setting for those two dark, set faces. They were alone together. Dr. Vallotson had left the room unnoticed; unnoticed as he would have been had he remained.

"Why not?"

The words contained no temporising. They simply passed to the consummation of the situation demanding this declaration which, at the same time, they utterly defied. Mrs. Vallotson met them with an uncompromising determination which was the very counterpart of that which faced her. But she was gripping the table heavily as she spoke, and the coarse power of her personality seemed to labour as under an overwhelming disability.

"It would be a scandal," she said. She seemed to breathe with difficulty. "All Alnchester talked of your relations to one another two years ago. Marriage between you would justify the worst that was said of you."

North Branston strode across the room and faced her, looking down at her with his white face working into passion.

"Adelaide," he said, "stop! You're saying what you know to be untrue. Speak out. Say that you have a grudge against the woman who is all that you are not. Say that you disliked her from the moment you saw her. Say that your infernal love of power is loth to see me escape from the intolerable loneliness you've created for me. Say that it's your will, alone, that is against my marriage."

As though his words in their uncompromising defiance had penetrated through the weight that hung about her, touching the dominant chord of her nature, Mrs. Vallotson rose to her feet confronting him. Her tall, strong figure seemed to expand and dilate; her face was suffused with colour, her eyes were bloodshot and wild. Coarse as her strength was in its unrestrained manifestation, there was a desperation in that sudden gathering of herself together which gave to her instinctive self assurance a touch of magnificence.

"So be it," she cried. "It is against my will! Once and for all I tell you so! It shall not be. The woman you have

chosen is no fit wife for you. You shall not marry her."

North Branston looked into her eyes and answered her.

"I shall marry her!" he said.

"With my consent, never!"

"Without it, then!"

A short, fierce laugh broke from him, and on the instant she stretched out her hand and laid it on his arm, gripping it with fingers of steel.

"Look back," she said hoarsely. "Look back over your life, and then say if you dare. If you defy me now, it is for the last time. I will never see you again. I will never hear your name mentioned. I will wipe you out of my life for ever. You owe me everything, you owe this woman nothing. Choose between us."

They were close together. The hot breath of each was on the other's face. The white heat of passion was throbbing at North Branston's heart, and he smiled.

"I do choose," he said. "You've thwarted me from first to last, I might have known you'd thwart me now. We hate each other, you and I—Heaven knows the reason. We'll cut our lives asunder from to-night."

INCREDULITY.

ONE suffers from having too little faith as well as from having too much. The individual who, as the records of the police-courts inform us, shows his "confidence" in a perfect stranger by entrusting him with his loose cash and valuables, is an example of too much faith. The man who, refusing to believe that his house can be on fire, is burnt in his bed, is an illustration of too little.

When to be incredulous is a thing well worth knowing. Think of the number of people who have had cause to regret their having been incredulous at the wrong time. If you had only believed in the future development of Slapton-by-the-Sea, what a fortune you might have made by a judicious investment in building sites twenty years ago! There was the Shell-out Mine—you might have been a millionaire if you had only believed in it in time. Look at your old chum, Jack Baines; you always were incredulous about that man's abilities. If you had only followed his lead, and stuck tight to his side, and not suggested that he was something worse than a fool, you might have been where he is now—at the top of the tree. Incredulity has kept you down.

The cynic who assures you that he believes in nothing and nobody is very far from being as clever as he would have you suppose; nor has his experience of the world been as extensive as he wishes you to think. Such a person is apt to see himself in others. If he really means what he says—and you will be safe in being, on that point, yourself a little incredulous—it is because he has, probably with good and sufficient reason, no faith in himself, and, therefore, none in others. It is tolerably certain that the man who believes in himself believes in some one else as well. It is “against nature” to suppose that any one can be so hardened in conceit as to imagine that there is no one but himself in the whole wide world deserving of a ray of credit. The man who believes in himself, finding others to believe in him, is bound to believe in them, or, obviously, he loses faith in himself.

If faith removes mountains, want of it raises them. If we believe that there is an insurmountable barrier between us and happiness, there is one—because we ourselves have placed it there. If we say of ourselves we have nothing, we have nothing—because we say it. Incredulity is not strength, it is weakness. Given the choice between belief in everything and belief in nothing, better by far, for us, the first. The credulous man makes no more failures than the incredulous; the odds are large that he makes more successes. While our mood is one of incredulity, never for a moment shall we attain possession of the elusive thing which we call happiness; credulity and happiness go hand in hand. To the incredulous man nothing is real; he doubts the love of wife and child; to him the whole social fabric is as unworthy of serious attention as some passing dream.

Incredulity, in some of its shapes, is a sign of disease. Dyspepsia breeds taunting fiends of unbelief. How can a man believe in the perfection of the dish which the cook has set before him, if he does not suffer a morsel of it to pass his lips? The being who is racked by nervous headache is not likely to have a lively belief in the soothing effects of music. Who is not doubtful if there is anything pleasurable in the sound of children's laughter when he is ill? The sufferer from chronic gout is scarcely to be persuaded of the exhilarating effects of exercise. The diseased man, being an unhappy man, is an incredulous man; it is only when, disease departing, health takes its place, that belief comes with it.

Incredulity, again, is a sign of incapacity.

Some folks find it impossible to believe that others can do what they cannot. They doubt if Palette painted that picture of his, which is the success of the year, because they are conscious that they never could have painted it. They have no faith in Struggler's ability to make his way in the world, being aware that such ability is wanting in themselves. Such folks are, in great measure, the creatures of ignorance. Their horizon is limited, they can see nothing beyond it. Tell an agricultural labourer in certain parts of the country, that in London fresh vegetables are procurable at very moderate prices all the year round, he does not believe you—unbelief in his case being born of ignorance. Or tell the same man that in Australia Christmas Day falls in the hottest part of the year, the chances are that he will doubt you again. Ignorance may be responsible for a deal of credulity; much incredulity may be laid at its door as well.

Incredulity, once more, may be the outcome of a moral or a mental twist. Some men are constitutionally incapable of believing in certain other men. One sees this characteristic amusingly displayed in politics. According to the Radicals, nothing good ever came, or ever could come, out of the Conservative camp; while Conservatives look askance at all Radical offspring, as if they were of necessity predestined to evil from the first. The same thing is seen to an even greater extent in religion. Consider the great multitude of Christians who are constitutionally incapable of believing that there can be good in any other religious system than their own. How many Protestants are there who hold it incredible that any good thing can come out of Rome? Can you number the Romanists who are without faith in anything the Protestants ever did? A similar peculiarity is seen in races. There are many Irishmen who can believe in nothing but Saxon “perfidy,” many Poles who can believe in nothing but Russian “wickedness,” many Bohemians who can believe in nothing but the German “brute,” many Englishmen who can believe in nothing but the “unspeakable” Turk.

The persecution of people for their opinions, the taste for which, to some extent, still survives, is a mistake for many reasons; but chiefly is it a mistake because so few people can be held responsible for their own opinions. Catholics seem to have burnt Protestants, and Protestants Catholics, because both sides contended that if the one side only chose to exercise the faculties

of reason bestowed by nature, that side would be where the other side was. The idea rested on the erroneous assumption that people arrive at their beliefs, or unbeliefs, by processes of logic. Few notions could be less correct. At least ninety per cent. of the inhabitants of these islands, if they were put into the witness-box, would probably be found incapable of giving one logical reason why they do, or do not, believe. A rather amusing instance of the sort of thing crossed my path the other day. A notorious "unbeliever" has long resided in a certain place I know. Recently I was informed that he had been "converted." Meeting him, I asked if this was so. He said that it was, adding, by way of explaining his conversion, "My little Tommy got run over by a butcher's cart—killed dead on the spot—and that was enough for me. It would have been enough for any man." The logic of this was delightful; if the man on similar grounds had been "converted," say, to Confucianism, a Christian missionary would have classed him at once as something lower than an idiot. Yet in England every day thousands of people are beginning to believe, or ceasing to believe, on slighter grounds than those which were furnished by little Tommy and the cart.

We may take it that logic has little or nothing to do with any one's belief, or with any one's want of it. A man may think that it has; but if he knows himself and diligently searches his own heart, he will begin to doubt it before he has done. Many people are physically, constitutionally, incapable of being "persuaded" on any subject whatsoever, just as there are many who are incapable of being "unpersuaded." But apart from these, generally speaking, we may say that in matters of belief we are creatures of environment, of accident, coincidence. In other words, our beliefs are outside ourselves, uncontrollable, the sport of circumstance. We are incredulous, or credulous, because we are; you will get no further! We see John Jones steal; we know he is a thief; but what is it which, in spite of our knowledge of his theft, makes us believe that there is in him something infinitely greater than a thief?

I know nothing of John Jones. I never saw him. I know nothing of the particular circumstances of his case; but I believe that there is in him something which is infinitely greater than a thief. I doubt, though you unloosed on my head floods of logic, if you would shake my belief; logic, regarded merely as logic, is not

likely to move me much either one way or the other. The way in which I arrive at my belief is, broadly speaking, sufficiently simple. My experience of the world and its ways has taught me, or has seemed to teach me, that men, in certain distinguishing characteristics, are colourable imitations of each other. The ultimate trend of those characteristics is largely a matter of accident. I know that in man there are all sorts of possibilities—in the direction of what is called evil, and in the direction of what is called good. I am a man, John Jones is a man; there you are! I am certain that in John Jones there is something which is infinitely greater than a thief.

At the same time I am aware that to many people not only will my reasoning seem no reasoning, but that they will deem it almost incredible that I can have such a belief. Think of the myriads who believe in the doctrine of original sin; who believe that men are predestined to evil as the sparks fly upwards; that no good thing can come out of them except by what is tantamount to miracle! In what light are they likely to regard John Jones? To me it seems almost incredible that any one can have such a belief; but I know that they have. It seems that they scarcely can be sane; but I know that they are. I am conscious that it is only another illustration of the personal irresponsibility of folks for the faith which is in them.

Those whose natural attitude is in the direction of credulity have, in many respects, the best of it. In how many things one would believe, if one only could! How many illusions are lost to us by the necessity for unbelief! If we could only hold fast to all the beliefs we have in our youth until we reached the grave! They say that the world is not so credulous as it used to be; but on that point I for one must own to incredulity. The young men and women seem to be just as full of dreams as ever they were—of just those sort of dreams which always have been, and which always will be, the heritage of youth. Think, for instance, of all the talk which is in the air just now about "new" things. If we listen to the young men and to the young women, everything is either "new" already, or it is immediately going to be "new." It is a "new" era, in which there are, or in which there soon will be, "new" women, "new" poetry, "new" literature, "new" art, "new" politics, "new" parties, "new" morals, "new" religion. Some time ago a

very clever gentleman wrote to ask me to contribute to a forthcoming periodical, which, so he said, was to "voice" the "new" fiction. I told him that I did not know what the "new" fiction was; I do not now, for, as it appeared to my limited comprehension, the explanation which he proffered only made confusion worse confounded.

For my part I doubt not only if there is anything new, but if there ever has been anything new, or if there ever will be. Men always have been fond of what they vainly imagined to be new things; it is an outcome of the restlessness which is inherent in human nature. The fondness was seen even in that newest of all places, the Garden of Eden; and was, possibly, not much more of a novelty then than it is to-day. How any one can say that the world is becoming less credulous when all this stir is being made about "new" things, surpasses one's understanding.

The world always has been and always will be credulous while youth remains. Youth is the oldest of the old things—and the youngest. It is the one thing which is always new. Youth, if it is worth anything, is self-assertive. It has to make its way, and to do so it pushes its way. It believes in itself, and, not infrequently, a necessary accompaniment of its belief in itself seems to be an unbelief in age. It believes that it has a better way; the things which are undone, and which are still to do, are always the best. It is only natural that the young man should believe that the thing which he is about to do will be well worth the doing. To him the future is the Tom Tiddler's ground from whose soil he shall win the things which are both beautiful and new; for him the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow always is in front. He sees the things which are; he perceives their seamy side—the young men have keen eyes for the weak places in the works which their fathers have wrought. He tells himself they can be bettered; shall he not be the one to do it?

This attitude is characteristic, we may be told, only of a section of the rising generation—and a small section it is. Modern youth, in the lump, is pessimistic; its position is one of constant negation; it believes in nothing, least of all does it believe in itself. That there are fools among young men is past denying, it is as true as that some of them are diseased. But if one is told that a healthy young man is a pessimist, i.e., that he has no faith

in himself or in others, one smiles. A couple of years ago a young man who, as a pessimist, went many leagues further than Schopenhauer, used to write me letters. There was nothing in the world but ugliness; life, in itself, was a catastrophe; virtue was vice, and vice was virtue, and both alike were foul—according to this young man. He himself, he frankly owned, was but a hideous atom in the common sewer. That is more than a couple of years ago. He has tasted of success since then—has actually married. When last I heard from him he said something about "his" beauty which is to be discovered even in animalcula—he still is young.

Is not this pessimism, which we are assured is a feature of our latter-day young men and maidens, in itself a sign of their youth, a proof of their credulity? As a matter of plain fact, fortunately for them and fortunately for us, our youths are just as young as ever they were; they display their greenness all the more conspicuously by their pretensions to the sere and yellow. This period of faithlessness in which so many of them suppose themselves to be, in the days when Carlyle was a power in the land, used to be called the period of "Sturm und Drang." Kingsley went through it, and Maurice, and the rest of the "muscular Christians;" it was "Sturm und Drang" which swept John Henry Newman and his friends into boundless faith.

We pray, some of us, that all our faculties may be preserved to us. Surely we include in our prayers the faculty of belief—if ever we had it! What is the use of believing that life is not worth living? How much better off if we can only believe that it is! If I can go to bed and lay my head upon the pillows and fall asleep, secure in the belief that to-morrow will bring forth pleasure and not pain, is not that belief worth having? We smile at the miracles which are stated to have taken place at Lourdes, and, still more recently, at Holywell. But think of the power of faith which the mention of such things suggests—and faith is a power, even in the healing of the diseases of the body. If Brown and I are lame, and Brown believes that he will be cured, and I do not believe that I shall be, surely Brown is better off than I am, even though his belief is never justified by events! And experience teaches us that the chances in favour of his cure are greater than they are in mine.

Beyond doubt the situations in life in which credulity is more to be desired than

incredulity are in the majority, though at first blush the assertion may seem to be a bold one. The common conversation of the world pretends otherwise, and, in so pretending, is guilty of a false pretence. Great things may have been done by unbelief, much greater things have certainly been done by belief. One might almost go so far as to say that while it is well to look, and to be careful that you have good grounds for belief, it is better to believe, even without good grounds. The man—if such an one actually exists—who really and truly does believe in nothing and in no one, must be, of all creatures, the most miserable.

The incredulous man is the critical man, and the critical man can scarcely be the happiest man. He who looks even a gift horse in the mouth would be almost better off without the faculty of vision. If Darby did indeed travel happily to the end of his journey with his old wife Joan, it was because his was not the critical vision. I protest that the tears come to my eyes when I read or hear of the man who believes, honestly believes, in the charms of his wife, even though she be toothless and grey. They are tears of envy—I would that it may be so with me. Love—that is love, not the frenzied female fictionist's highfalutin' kind of thing—is the breath of life, the thing which makes life better than death. If a man has no sort of belief in the woman he has folded in his arms, how shall he love her? Without faith how shall any love? That shall not be a good day for you in which your Joan casts behind her back the last shred of her belief in you. To be believed in—is that not worth having? To believe in some one else—is that not worth having too?

The world of pure reason hardly commends itself to the imagination as a world it would be nice to live in. If everything were to be done by rule of thumb some of the pleasantest things—which, in the world as it is, we do—would needs be left undone. If we had to give the why and the wherefore of the faith that is in us, faith of any sort would rapidly become an extinct quantity. One finds it difficult to conceive how that would advantage either the fractions or the whole. If we only knew it, one of the chief things for which we ought to be thankful is the fallibility of human nature. Our very weakness is our strength. We are not strong enough to insist upon reason always being our guide, and it is lucky for us that we are not. When the Marchioness in "The Old Cu-

riosity Shop" put the orange-peel into the water and "made believe" that it was wine, it was certainly not the spirit of reason which she summoned from the "vasty deep," and she was happier than if it had been. Not only believe, but "make believe"—many are the crises in our lives when we should be happy if we could even get as far as that.

"This is an age of incredulity!" The parrot cry is being bandied from mouth to mouth, and from pen to pen. Like all generalisations the statement is easier made than proved. But if the thing is really true, if all the things which folks have believed in for so long are not believed in any more, the more's the pity—for the world! I am glad to still be able to write myself among the credulous; more, I believe that those who pretend to believe least, at the bottom of their hearts are as credulous as I am. They must, when the sun is shining, occasionally believe in the joy of life; even when the skies are darkened, they must, occasionally, believe in the tonic qualities of the bracing winds. Somewhere there is a man or a woman in whom they must believe. And if they will only look into their own lives and see how little worthy of trust they are themselves, though conscious all the time of their desire to be worthy, knowing how pleasant a thing it is to be believed in, surely for their own sakes, consenting to be a little credulous, they will sow the seed of faith broadcast, even though some of it may fall on stony ground.

"THRIFT."

A COMPLETE STORY.

His mother had insisted on calling him Thrift. No one knew why she had given him the quaint name. Then when he was barely two years old, she died. She left him with a great wealth of silent love, but that, like his name, could not help him much. That is, not as far as one can judge things. The neighbours said it was a cough that had "settled," that carried her off. Probably the cough had something to do with it, but a starved-out life of lack of affection, and hard work, had a good deal more.

The neighbours also thought that Mrs. Watson never had much spirit. It would seem as if they almost blamed her for dying, and leaving a husband with a child barely two years old. They had misgivings about the boy, and there they were right. Thrift was deaf and dumb. His mother had

struggled against the knowledge as long as she could. When she realised it she kept the knowledge to herself with a fierce love. But the cough came, and settled all the problems of her life for her.

Thrift's father took her death as apathetically as he had taken her all her life. Only Thrift seemed to realise that fate was still against him. He lay crying for hours alone in the little cottage, strapped into his cot. It was a weird, pathetic cry. The neighbours were kind to him. They took him in turn to their cottages, but the element of teasing children and rough handling was discordant to him. The women meant well, but it was a hard winter, and money and tempers were short. Besides, Thrift's baby nature was hard to understand.

Brightness came into his life one day. It came in the guise of a little dressmaker, Jean Lawrence. She brought him a black frock. She had been busy, so she had put off the making till she had time. No one else had thought of the little mark of respect. It was a tribute to custom, but it was the one tribute of Mrs. Watson's life.

"Puir little lamb!" said Jean Lawrence as she came in. Her eyes filled with quite unexpected tears as she saw the lonely baby.

Thrift could not hear her, but something sympathetic touched his understanding, for he held out his hands. "Puir little thing!" said Jean Lawrence again, and she caught him up and covered him with kisses. Then she put Thrift back in his cot, and untied the little black frock. She turned to go, for she was in a hurry.

Thrift's mood changed. His blue eyes grew dark in the intensity of his passion. He kicked and screamed. His fluffy fair hair was ruffled, he looked the picture of a little demon.

"Presairve us!" said the little dressmaker.

It was the first time any exaggeration of feeling had come into her life. She was half fascinated and half terrified by this unexpected burst. "Presairve us!" she repeated more emphatically. She never could explain afterwards what prompted her, but she stepped to the cot, wrapped a blanket round Thrift, and did not stop to think till she had deposited him safely in her own house. It was characteristic of Jean Lawrence that she never reasoned out why she had done this action. Certainly she never regretted it. It was quite an easy matter to settle the disposal of Thrift with his father. He was only too glad to be rid of the burden.

The first clashing of wills occurred over

the same little black frock. Thrift ungratefully refused to have anything to do with it. Miss Lawrence was perplexed. It would never do to dress him in colours on a Sunday. She compromised by making him a white frock, with a broad black sash. It set off the child's fairness, but still more it satisfied her sense of fitness.

Jean Lawrence always thought of that episode as an epoch in her life. The next epoch was the sudden resolve of Thrift's father to go to America. Jean Lawrence lived in a state of tension till he had sailed. It seemed incredible to her that he could wish to leave his boy behind. She only saw the extreme desirability of Thrift in any manner and way. Thrift's father did not.

It was soon after this that Jean Lawrence's old lover returned to his native village. This caused more thought in the village than Jean herself gave to it. It was ten years since John Forbes and she had been going to be married, and ten years is a long time in a woman's life! Since Thrift had entered her life she was utterly oblivious of anything except her work. The more money she made, the more she could do for Thrift.

Jean Lawrence had always kept to herself, and no one knew why she and John Forbes had never married.

Her old mother was alive then, and every one knew she would have liked the match. John Forbes had come back greyer and older than he had gone away, but he was richer and even more able to afford a wife.

Time had not gone very well with Jean. She was thin and small always, and she had had a hard life of work. Her sparse drab hair was beginning to be sprinkled with grey. She looked older than she really was. The village came to the conclusion that John Forbes "would go by her, and seek a younger, bonnier woman." The two most concerned gave no cause for gossip.

John Forbes would sometimes stop as he was passing the little cottage, and say a few words. There never was any allusion to past times between them. They called each other Mr. Forbes and Miss Lawrence studiously. That was the only clue either of them had that there was a mutual past between them.

On the Sundays that Jean went to church—her thoughts were always divided between the bairn at home and the Psalms, to her great discomfiture—John Forbes would sometimes overtake her. They talked of the sermon; then of the crops and the

weather. By degrees these subjects gained an easy familiarity, and only varied with the seasons.

No one was more surprised than Jean, when John Forbes asked her, one day, to marry him. She stared at him in emotionless calm.

"Ye must gie me time," she said.

John Forbes agreed to this quite placidly. It was hard to understand what he saw in his first love in her faded and aged old-maidism. Possibly a tenacity of affection and the same instinct of faithfulness that brought him back to the little village, the little village with no pretensions to beauty or picturesqueness, kept him true to Jean. One was the home, the other the woman he had loved. He saw no reason to change because he had seen many fairer homes and younger, prettier women.

Jean did not analyse her sentiments. It was not her way. Besides, love never entered her head as far as it concerned John Forbes. She merely reviewed the advantages as they concerned Thrift. The rumour that a new and more modern dressmaker was going to set up finally settled it, and she said John yes.

The day was fixed for the second time in their lives. Jean had given up her house. She was waiting with tranquillity for this new step in her life. She had quite come to the conclusion that she could not do better for Thrift. One evening John Forbes arrived. Thrift lay contentedly on the hearthrug looking at him. The last time John had been at the cottage Thrift had been in one of his passionate fits.

This had set him pondering.

After this there had been several well-meant efforts at kindness on the part of his friends. They happened to coincide with his own views. They advised him to send Thrift away. Jean, they said, would neglect every one and everything for the Boy. She would wear herself out for Thrift, but not bother with anything that did not concern him.

How far he believed this, or how far a man's dislike to scenes or a natural desire to have his wife's affection centred in himself had to do with his resolve, he could not have told. He bestirred himself, and with infinite trouble and by some outlay he secured an admission for the child to a deaf and dumb institution.

It was this fact he had come to tell Jean. He rather wished Thrift would help him to lead up to it by a scene. Thrift gave him no help. He lay smiling impenetrably.

Jean was not quick at reading signs.

"Jean," he said at last helplessly, "we'll be merrit Tuesday?"

"Ay," assented Jean cheerfully. Her eyes fell naturally on Thrift, and she smiled at the boy.

"And Thrift?" John added, with a suspiciously clear note of interrogation in his voice.

"Ay, Thrift," she repeated.

"Ay, Thrift," said John. Then finding this even did not progress matters, he said desperately, with a snatch at humour: "Ye ken I'm no merrying Thrift?"

The old clock ticked through the room. The peats spluttered on the low hearth, in front of which on a curiously woven rug Thrift lay.

There was absolute silence for a bit. Then Jean's voice broke it.

"Then, John Forbes, ye're no merrying me."

Again there was silence.

John said in a quiet voice:

"I hae made a' the arrangements for him, Jean. He will gang to a schule fa' they'll teach him to read, and write, and understand talk of a kind."

"Will they teach him to talk like ither fowk?"

Her tone was expressionless.

"Na, they canna dae that."

"Then why should the bairn be bothered wi' learning that'll niver dae him or any one else any gude? Tell me that, John Forbes."

"It will give him employment, Jean, and besides—" here John Forbes with a man's tactlessness undid every bit of good his arguments might have effected. He added: "Fowk tell me ye just mak' an id-d o' him, and that ye hae nae ither idea but him. A man couldna be expect'd to stan' that, and ither people kenning it."

Jean had been passing through a crisis, and she was but a woman.

"And if fowk care to gossip over my affairs, John Forbes, and you care to heed them, lat them," she retorted vehemently. "If Thrift disna gang wi' me, nae poo'r's will tak' me to your hoose."

John was annoyed by her tone.

"And supposing I say I winna hae Thrift?"

They sat on in a strained silence.

John was too angry to move or speak. Jean had no wish, either, to break the silence.

"Ye ken this is the second time your obstinacy has come in the wye," said John finally.

"I mind," said Jean briefly. "But I

didna mean ye to tak' it as ye did yon time," she added.

"I didna ken," replied John.

It struck neither of them that there was any pathos in the sentence—a pathos of a ten years' mistaken silence!

"Are ye sure ye mean it noo?" he asked, getting up.

"I certainly dae," said Jean firmly.

"Then guid-bye, Jean."

"Guid-bye."

The instant the door was shut Jean almost strangled Thrift with kisses.

Unfortunately the practical things could not be settled so summarily.

Jean had given up her house, and she found it was let to the new dressmaker. She was not accustomed to complications in her life. Alternatives seemed to crop up, and they worried her. At the same time Thrift was her one object. Everything was directed to this aim. After some few weeks she got a tumble-down little cottage about half a mile from the straggly village. It proved too far, or the "hang" of the new dressmaker's skirts proved too much for Jean's old customers. Work and pay became scant. The little dressmaker bore up proudly and bravely. She stinted and starved herself, but Thrift grew and flourished. There loomed before her always a fear of the "Charity" where her boy might be taught—and no one knew at what expense of unkindness.

If the worst came to the worst she would ask John Forbes to get him in, and she would become a servant. One wintry evening the child was fretful and ailing. A knock came to the door and John Forbes entered. He did not seem to notice the extreme poverty of the cottage, nor the miserable attempt at the fire. This fact brought a rush of gratitude to Jean's heart. It was to see if these things were as bad as report said, that he had come.

He took Thrift up on his knee, and he talked occasionally to Jean.

"Can I dae anything for ye?" he said suddenly. "For the boy, ye ken."

A little flush came in Jean's cheeks. She faltered her thanks.

In a rush of love for Thrift she began faintly to realise that she had not appreciated this man as he deserved. In the same moment she realised she had thrown her chance away.

No idea that she might work on her old lover's pity crossed her mind. She began timidly asking him if he could manage to send Thrift to the home he had mentioned.

"Why noo, when ye were so set against it?" asked John, with a severity that was not reassuring.

"It's circumstances," said Jean briefly.

She felt she would die rather than let John Forbes know there was nothing in the house to eat and no money. She would have risked everything but the fear of Thrift falling ill.

"Weel," said John slowly, "I'll see about it. But hoo wull ye pay me, Jean?"

The little dressmaker drew herself up.

"There'll be no fear o' that, John Forbes."

"But ye hivna tell't me in fat wye, Jean."

"In honest money by honest wark."

The pink flush had deepened into a deep crimson on her cheek.

"But I dinna want your money, and as for wark, suppose ye come and wark for me."

"Na, na," said Jean involuntarily. She had had her chance of being mistress at the farm. She could not stoop to work for another, as she supposed he meant.

"Weel, come wi'oot doing ony wark."

Jean looked at him in utter bewilderment.

"The difference atween us lay in Thrift."

If he gaes awa' there's naething need hinder your coming to the farm."

"I didna expec' ye'd think I meant yon," said the little woman. She was thoroughly hurt. "I'll thank ye a' the days o' my life if ye'll dae for Thrift, but I am no seeking to be beholden to you for mysel'."

"Ye'll be gey lonely wi'oot Thrift."

"Ay." Jean nearly smiled because she was so near to tears at the thought.

"I'll be lonely at the farm."

"Ye can mairry," said Jean. She suddenly felt that she had cut herself off from every possibility by her suggestion. She had done it for Thrift all along: she would have married him for Thrift's sake, she gave him up for Thrift's sake. Now Thrift by her own act was to go away from her. And John Forbes was nothing to her. The unexpected touch of kindness had brought a rush of sympathy to her heart. She did not know it, but it had broken down the barrier that her love for Thrift had built up round her woman's heart.

"Ay," answered John Forbes slowly.

"But ye maun ask me this time, Jean."

"Oh, I couldna," faltered Jean. She felt confused and trembling. She looked down.

"And I winna, nae a third time."

"I'm no fit to be a leddy noo," she murmured.

Then she looked up. John saw in her eyes a look he had not seen for more than the ten years.

"Jean!"

"John!"

That was all the love-making that passed between them, but they understood each other then.

When John went out, Jean seized Thrift and kissed him as she had done once before.

But she knew that for the first time since he had come into her life he had only the second place. She thought she hid the fact in her inmost heart, but John Forbes guessed it. He had the tact to hide his knowledge from his wife. For the Tact that Love brings is often the highest wisdom!

THE HAPPY LAND.

THERE are three things which nearly every man, however limited his knowledge or experience, believes himself able to do, i.e., choose a horse, understand a woman, and govern a country. It is the latter delusion which has led so many clever men, from Plato down to Mr. Bellamy, to give us their conception of a Happy Land, wherein a prosperous and law-abiding people live contentedly under an ideal government. These conceptions have naturally differed widely with the period and country in which they have been imagined, but in one important respect a strong family likeness runs through them all. This similarity is to be found in the fact that the majority of the theoretical arrangements, whether social or political, are wholly incapable of being put into practice. Like Carlyle, these philosophers of the art of governing seem to think that they have done their part in giving ideas to the world; they leave lesser men to carry them to a practical conclusion.

It is probable that few of us would care to live in a New Republic, though many of the Platonic theories were based on sound common sense, while others would be considered remarkably liberal and enlightened even at the present day. The New Woman would certainly hail the sage of Athens as a valuable ally—if only for his assertion that women should have the same education as men, namely, music, gymnastics, and the art of war. The fact that women are unlike men he held to be no reason why they should have a different training, but rather the reverse, contending that the

actual amount of sexual divergence could not be discovered until the conditions of life of both sexes were precisely similar, and had been so for generations. He looked forward to the day when the whole State should go out to war as one great family, and believed that custom would soon do away with the idea of there being anything ridiculous in the sight of a stout, middle-aged lady bestriding a war-horse, or even competing with men in the arena.

It is doubtful whether the Platonic marriage arrangements would be received with favour by the women of any age, these being directed entirely to the physical improvement of the race, at the cost of conjugal, maternal, and filial love. Once a year, at holy marriage festivals, men and women were to be suitably mated by government, the strong with the strong and the weak with the weak, the offspring of the inferior couples being destroyed, and that of the superior being brought up by the State. The mothers were to be taken to the public nursery to nurse the babies, but care was to be exercised that they should not recognise their own children. Although the philosopher considers this unnatural plan to be expedient, socially speaking, he admits that there are many difficulties in the way of carrying it out, but declares that an idea is none the worse for being impracticable.

Our modern Democrats and Socialists would not, it is to be feared, find the New Republic an earthly paradise, for although the inhabitants thereof were to regard each other as brothers and sisters, they were not to blink the fact that there is no such thing as natural equality. On the contrary, they were to recognise that human beings are made of different materials, some of gold, some of silver, some of copper, but that a copper parent may have a golden child, and vice versâ. The elders were to rule the younger, and the public guardians were to be men of experience, who had passed through both dangers and pleasures, and at every age had come out of such trials victorious.

While music and gymnastics were to form the principal branches of education in the New Republic, simplicity was to be the chief characteristic of its literature, art, and diet; since Sicilian cookery, Attic confections, and Corinthian courtesans are to gymnastics what Lydian and Ionic melodies are to music. Besides, where gluttony and intemperance prevail, the town quickly fills with doctors and lawyers. The Platonic

medical man, by the way, was never to attempt to keep a weakly patient alive; he was either to kill or cure, for the citizens of a well-ordered State have no time to be ill. Lawyers and poets were alike to be excluded, the former for obvious reasons, the latter because poetry is an outrage on the understanding, unless the hearers have that balm of knowledge which heals error. All things considered, perhaps it is just as well that no practical experiments of the Platonic social theories have ever been made, or are likely to be made if we may believe the prophecy of their author that "until kings are philosophers and philosophers kings, cities will never cease from evil, nor will our ideal polity ever come into being."

The "New Republic" has had a numerous posterity; indeed, the books that have been inspired by the dream of a Happy Land would form quite a respectable library in themselves. Chief among these, of course, are the "De Republica" of Cicero, the "De Civitate Dei" of Saint Augustine, the "De Monarchia" of Dante, the "Utopia" of Sir Thomas More, and the "New Atlantis" of Bacon. The two latter are naturally the most interesting to us, and all the more so because, although they owe their being to their famous Greek predecessor, they contain almost more points of divergence from, than of resemblance to the "New Republic."

Sir Thomas More, like Plato, was in many respects centuries in advance of his age. The sympathy, humanity, and spirit of toleration which distinguish "Utopia" from earlier works of the same nature, are due in a measure, no doubt, to the stirring influences of the period at which it was conceived. The murmurs of the Reformation were making themselves heard; the New Testament was beginning to be understood as it never had been understood before, and the forgotten treasures of Greek literature had come as a revelation to the scholars of fifteenth-century Europe. Some fads and many fallacies are contained in the "Utopia," but the motive and intention are so excellent and the details given so minute, that the book must always be interesting and valuable if only for the light it throws upon the social evils of the day, and the extent to which these were recognised and reprobated by the author.

There is certainly the germ of a bright idea in the Utopian arrangement that each of the cities should possess farms in the country, each farm being worked by thirty

men and women, who were under the rule of the good-man and good-wife of the house. Out of every farm twenty persons went yearly to the city, and in their place as many were sent out to learn husbandry from those who had already spent a year in the country. Unfortunately, it is obvious that under such a system neither the husbandman nor the mechanic would ever learn his business thoroughly, while the authors, artists, and students would have no chance at all. But a modified version of the plan applied to the industrial classes only, might very possibly prove a success.

Sir Thomas More had a strong objection to sheep-farms, declaring that the sheep ate up the people. Accordingly, we find that on the Utopian farms tillage was more particularly advanced, and that a great number of chickens were hatched, not in the natural way, but by means of a gentle equal heat; a prophetic vision of the incubator. Although husbandry was a science common to all alike, the people had each their proper handiwork, either cloth-weaving, masonry, smithcraft, or carpentering, for no others to speak of were known. Sir Thomas held the theory that if all persons were made to work, including women and priests, there would be no need that any should labour more than six hours a day. In his sketch of a Utopian day, however, no fewer than nine hours are allotted to work, six in the morning, and three in the afternoon. Two hours are allowed at midday for dinner and rest, one after supper for play, and eight for sleep. The remainder of the day the people might spend as they pleased, though not in riot or sloth, but rather in the study of some branch of science, lectures being given early in the morning that all might attend. One cannot but feel that the Utopian Jack may have been rather a dull boy.

The houses in Amauroth, the capital city, were large and luxurious, with much glass in the windows, and beautiful gardens at the back, but the custom of changing houses by lot once in ten years strikes one as an inconvenient arrangement. The families into which the city was divided messed together in public halls, and the householder was allowed to take anything he wanted from the national store-houses without payment or exchange, a system which must have rendered the business of housekeeping singularly easy and pleasant. The towns were never allowed to increase or decrease in population beyond a certain

limit, the surplus numbers being accommodated in cities founded under Utopian laws in a neighbouring country where there was much waste ground, while in the case of decrease, people were received from that country into Utopia. How extremely useful, from the political economist's point of view, must that country have been, which could supply immigrants, or waste ground for emigrants, just as its neighbour might require!

In order to bring gold and silver into disrepute, the Utopians made felons' chains and base utensils of precious metals, and ate and drank out of earthen vessels. When they found pearls and diamonds they decked their children with them, who, when they grew up, laid them aside of their own accord. When strange Ambassadors visited the country, gorgeous with gold and jewels, the children would dig their mothers in the sides, and say: "Look, mother, how great a lubber doth yet wear pearls and precious stones, as though he were a little child still!"

Whereupon the mother would reply: "Peace, child, I think he be one of the Ambassador's fools."

But the most remarkable feature of Utopian life, and the one most deserving of imitation, was the law which decreed that every man should be free to follow his own religion, whatever it might be, and to bring other men to his way of thinking by peaceable means, but which forbade him to use any violent or seditious modes of conversion. The Utopian priests were distinguished for their holiness, but they were very few in number, though old women and widows were allowed to take orders. The churches were open to all sects alike, and there was nothing denominational in the services.

In Bacon's "New Atlantis," we read but little about the social life of the island of Benzalem, except that the people were virtuous, had large families, and objected to taking bribes. The greater portion of the fragment is devoted to an account of the splendours of Solomon's House, an institution which had been founded in ancient times by a wise and good ruler with the object of gaining "knowledge of causes and secret motions of things, and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire to the effecting of all things possible." Although the inhabitants of Benzalem in general were forbidden to travel, once in twelve years ships were sent out carrying three of the brethren of

Solomon's House, who traded not in gold and silver, but "in God's first creature, which is Light." In other words, they brought home knowledge of the sciences, arts, and inventions of the world, as well as books, instruments, and all kinds of patterns.

During the narrator's stay on the island, one of the fathers of the institution arrived in the capital. Unlike the great men of Utopia, he was dressed in the most elaborate attire, and travelled in a chariot ornamented with the most gorgeous trappings. He was comely in appearance, and had an aspect as if he pitied men. The father gave an account of the foundation to which he belonged, describing how he and his colleagues had made deep caves under the hills to be used as refrigerators, conservatories and the like, and how they had built high towers for taking observations of the snow, rain, and winds. They possessed, moreover, great lakes, both salt and fresh, violent streams and cataracts, artificial wells and baths for the cure of diseases, furnaces of great diversity, large gardens and parks full of birds and beasts to be used for scientific purposes. He alluded, besides, to their medicine-houses, sound-houses, perspective-houses, mathematical-houses, perfume-houses, and houses of deceits of the senses. It is rather tantalising only to read the names of these wonderful establishments, and we cannot but wish that the author had thought fit to enlarge upon his theme, and had explained more fully the scope and arrangements of his ideal College of Natural Science.

Swift, had he been inspired by more love for and faith in his fellow Yahoos, might have given us a magnificent picture of a Happy Land. As it is, although many of the Lilliputian laws were sensible and well-considered, the only really attractive country which Gulliver met with in the course of his travels was the equine paradise of the Houyhnhnms.

Johnson, in his "Rasselas," wrote of the search for happiness, but not of its discovery. In later times, imaginative writers, with a taste for sociology, have often described the benefits that would accrue to a country were it to be governed by a patent system, warranted never to get out of order, of the author's own invention.

The most fashionable form of theoretical government at the present day appears to be a Despotic Democracy. Under this system, individualism of all kinds is carefully stamped out, and men and women

are enlisted in an industrial army, the working and discipline of which are modelled upon that of the German army. The author usually enhances the attractions of his plan by assuring his readers that there will be money enough for every person to enjoy a handsome income, and that the hours of labour, more especially in the less agreeable branches of trade and manufacture, will be extremely short. How this can be managed he proves with, to his own mind, unanswerable logic, but never quite succeeds in convincing the propertied reader.

In an amusing skit on recent works of this class Mr. Jerome has given a description of the condition of this country a hundred years hence, when the Government, he imagines, will be engaged in carrying on an unequal warfare with Nature on account of her anti-Socialistic methods. The people of the twentieth century will all be washed, dressed, and fed by the State, and their hair dyed a uniform brown in order that none may glory in golden locks, while those who are bigger and handsomer than their fellows will be condemned to lose an arm by way of rectifying matters. Yet in spite of all this more than parental care, Nature will constantly vindicate her right to over-indulge some of her children, and behave like a cruel stepmother to others.

The weak point of all highly-coloured pictures of an ideal Happy Land seems to lie in their authors' ignorance or forgetfulness of the main elements of human nature. The imaginary rulers are depicted as invariably wise, just, and disinterested; the imaginary people as invariably contented, orderly, and prosperous, with a full appreciation of the excellence of their own laws, and no desire to "better themselves." Under such conditions it is probable that any form of government, from the most despotic down to the most democratic, would answer equally well.

DAVID CROWHURST'S ORDEAL.

A STORY IN SIX CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER VI. A REVELATION.

WITH poor Elsie's departure all acute or keen suffering died out of David Crowhurst's life. Witnessing her misery had been his deepest distress; the feeling that she was at rest operated like a soothing balm to the wounds whose scars would prove ineffaceable. He was conscious of no positive anguish, only a sense of infinite

languor and sadness, a sort of soft and pensive shadow of the pain which had once throbbled so fiercely. The warm affection of the three girls was a constant solace to the man who loved them so devotedly; it reconciled him to the world, and was gradually wafting him into a haven of peace. The chords of woe and apprehension ceasing to vibrate, sank into abeyance. The old troubled look was fading out of the kindly eyes; some invisible hand seemed to be smoothing the deeply graven lines from his brow; he began to realise that this peaceful aftermath might prove fairer than the days of his stormy youth. So the time passed on contentedly until twenty-three years had elapsed since Reuben Raeburn had disappeared.

As David happened to be driving through Streatfield one day, the storekeeper, who also filled the office of postmaster, called out as he passed:

"Wait, Mr. Crowhurst, here's a letter for you; it's been waiting ever so long, but you scarcely ever come into the village, and I had no way of letting you know. Here it is."

David drove on. The ties which bound him to the outer world were so few that he scarcely ever received letters. As he curiously examined the address he was stunned as by a physical blow; a sudden chill smote him, he grew dizzy, and white to the lips.

"I have never seen but one handwriting like that," he murmured, "and that hand must have been still for many a long year."

He drove on steadily and mechanically, but when he had passed some distance beyond the precincts of the village, he stopped, tied his horse to a tree, and passed into the sheltering shade of the woods, still clasping tightly that inoffensive-looking letter, which he regarded with a sort of superstitious horror. He stumbled as he moved, and in the effort to hold himself erect, the grass, and trees, and sky became confused, floating about, coming down as if to crush him. It required a distinct effort of will to enable him to open the envelope, but with his fingers quivering nervously he managed it at last. He read it over and over again in a vain effort to master the contents. It was very simply worded, and to the point. It ran:

"DEAR CROWHURST,—I know that poor Elsie has gone, but I should like to see the children before I start on my last journey. They will not even know their father. Everything will be explained when we

meet. Bring them to three hundred and ninety-three, Blank Street, New York. Lose no time, as my hours are numbered. I ask only my just due, and have every confidence that you will recognise compliance with my request as a plain duty.—Yours,

“REUBEN RAE BURN.”

Crowhurst started with all the impetuosity of youth. His hot heart blazed with impotent resentment; his blood burned at fever heat; his eyes glowed with sombre fire; his dry, white lips refused to frame the bitter words he wished to utter. David's whole soul rose up in vehement protest. He thought with a strong, silent fury of the man by whose wayward will all these miserable convulsions of existence had been produced. Anger, desolateness, a crushing sense of wrong swept over him like a whirlwind; this tempest of mingled passions shook him to the very depths of his being, and his spirit was divided within him. A cry of exceeding bitterness and wrath escaped his lips.

“Curse him! curse him! curse him! It was all for nothing, Elsie's ruined life and my misery. Oh! God in Heaven! Can such things be allowed?” Then, throwing himself face downwards on the grass, he sobbed aloud, long shuddering sobs which shook his strong frame like a convulsion. There, alone, amidst the silent beauty of the summer's day, David Crowhurst went through the hardest conflict he had ever fought. “Shall I tear this letter up, and never disturb the girls by letting them know anything about it? They are mine, bound to me by every tie of love and protection. He has forfeited his rights, it is I who have filled a father's place. Now, he will take them from me, and how can I live without them? Why should I hesitate? I owe him nothing; he has blackened my whole life. The sacrifice is too great; it is too much to ask of a man. I can't do it—oh! Heaven help me! I can't do it. But, then, is it what Elsie would wish? Have I a right to keep them from their father?”

As he lay there, the remembrance of every separate slight and pang which he had endured returned to him. The horror of the arid, barren years; the burden of the pain he had borne; the loneliness and isolation; all rose in array before him. He recalled the despoiling of Elsie's happiness, the crushing of all germs of faith and hope, of womanly, tender instincts; and through all he could only breathe from the depths of

his sorely tried heart: “Heaven help me! Oh, Heaven! do not forsake me!” with a sort of desperate persistence; and with the prayer came help.

The shadows were lengthening, a flood of evening gold crowned the hill crests, as David emerged from that wilderness of temptation. He could not prove faithless; his thoughts were reverent in their trouble, notwithstanding the irrepressible doubt within him. The crisp, green pines were rustling overhead; far back, in the closely lying woods, the wild birds were calling to each other. The sky was opaline, descending into purest yellow, then fading into a faint visionary blue, just touched with gossamer veils of cloud. As David looked steadily into that evening glow his face was like that of some glorified spirit, who had conquered tribulation, and who through direst travail of the soul had won the way to assured peace.

That night, David Crowhurst, accompanied by Raeburn's three daughters, started for New York. The girls were startled, frightened, and mystified. Their existence had been so secluded, so remote from ordinary interests, that this abrupt change alarmed them. They had retained no remembrance of form or feature of that unknown parent whose mysterious fate had clouded their young lives; they had so long accepted their father's death as an assured fact, that the idea of the lost man's resuscitation agitated far more than it gratified them. A feeling of intense sadness possessed David as the shy, shrinking girls clung trembling to him. The sunshine was about to die off from him, and he was standing in the last rays, trying to make the most of them. He saw his future life, barren and solitary, no longer to be sweetened by the presence of these creatures who had seemed entirely his own.

“I must see him first alone. I've got the lassies to think of, they must be my first care,” David decided when they reached New York.

Leaving the girls to rest, he sought out the address given in Raeburn's letter. It was a good boarding-house in a respectable neighbourhood. The room in which the sick man lay was bright and cheerful, as well as comfortably furnished. When Crowhurst's glance fell upon hollow, glittering eyes and shrunken features, all the latent animosity died out of his heart, though he remained staunch to his own view of the obligations he had assumed.

“I must know all about this before I

allow the girls to be worried and upset," he said frankly and resolutely.

"The girls—my children?" questioned Raeburn in genuine and unaffected surprise. The idea that the little helpless children whom he had deserted so many years before should have any right to judge his conduct, never seemed to have occurred to him.

"They are my children," protested David. "For all these years they have had nobody to look to but me, and I am the one who has had their interest at heart. I couldn't protect their mother from you; you worked your wicked will, and I had to look on helplessly, while she bore the consequences. Reuben Raeburn, if it cost your life and mine, I would prevent you from harming my girls," David stoutly maintained.

"What nonsense you are talking!" muttered his companion uneasily. But, sitting there, silent, impassive, inexorable, the farmer was not to be turned from his purpose; he should hear the whole story of Raeburn's life from the moment he had quitted Ingleside, before he would bring the girls to their father.

Raeburn's account of his own proceedings was very simple. He had bitterly resented his own failure to obtain control of his wife's legacy; and his original idea had been to frighten and bring her to terms by a brief, temporary absence. After his conversation with Guthrie on the road, he had hidden behind one of the large gates that stood always open, until he could succeed in stealing away unobserved. He had watched Crowhurst's arrival, and his unreasonable, jealous rage had been increased by the conversation he had overheard. When, with darkness, everything had settled into quiet, he crossed at the back of his own farm, walked all night; at daybreak he crept into a barn, and rested during the day; amidst the obscurity of the following night, he travelled on again. The next morning he reached a distant railway station, where there seemed slight chance of being recognised. For some time he had been preparing for his flight, drawing money from the bank in small sums, and was therefore well provided with funds. During his stay in New York, he happened to go on board an ocean steamer, and prompted by some impulse for which he utterly failed to account, he took passage, intending to return by the next trip. When he arrived on the other side, he chanced to come across a Canadian newspaper containing an account of his own disappearance, and the commotion excited

thereby. This was an aspect of the question which he had never considered, and as some idea of the gossip and derision which would greet his reappearance dawned upon his mind, he was appalled by the thought of the ordeal. Pride and shame assured him that he could never endure to find himself an object of ridicule to the whole country-side. While he was still anxiously debating the matter, he was robbed of his purse in the London streets. This loss left him friendless and penniless in the London streets, and his perverse pride prevented him from making known to the wife, whom his chief desire had been to punish and humiliate, his miserable plight. This question settled the matter decisively, and he gave up all thought of returning home. A period of terrible privation followed; there had been times when he had not known where to look for bread, and when it had seemed as though he must perish from actual starvation. Then, a singularly fortunate chance had thrown employment in his way; and, once a solid footing was gained, the sober, thrifty Scotchman had prospered steadily until he found himself a partner in an extensive grain business, in which his practical experience of farming proved an advantage. He would often have sent money to his wife and family, but had feared such an action. He stated with some complacency that he had realised a handsome competency which was willed to his children. He declared that his affection for his family had never known change or diminution. He had never attempted to form other ties, but had remained, to the very end, a stranger among strangers. In the course of the twenty-three years he had come out to Canada three times, had hung about the vicinity of his own home, had watched his wife and children, and had kept himself thoroughly conversant with all his affairs. He confessed that the temptation to return had sometimes been very strong, yet he prided himself upon never having yielded to a desire to swerve from his original determination.

"Reuben Raeburn, your pride and spite have been stronger than your love of wife or children," David exclaimed solemnly, as he recovered from the sort of horrified amazement with which he had listened.

A sudden brightness illuminated the dying man's spectral, hollow eyes.

"Yes, once I determined, I never really faltered, whatever the cost," he returned, with proud satisfaction.

For an instant it seemed to Crowhurst that he looked on Elsie Raeburn's face, first fair and blooming, as he remembered it in early youth; then as the restless, storm-driven woman; and lastly, wan, wasted, and peaceful, as he had seen it in her coffin.

"God forgive you, man, but you are a great sinner," he said brokenly. "You don't even realise the evil your pride has caused. Forgiving you is the hardest work I have ever done in my life."

As for the girls, they were gentle, affectionate creatures, little addicted to analysis of motives or fathoming of characters; they accepted the facts as related by Crowhurst quite simply and naturally. Their father had returned to them, there was no possibility of doubting that fact, and it quite satisfied them. They were very enthusiastic over their new-found parent, idealising his story and his qualities in an unreasoning, feminine fashion which should have been very gratifying to the invalid, though he received it as a matter of course and his just due.

Raeburn could never be brought to see the enormity of his own conduct. He had so long posed in his own sight as a martyr that his mind proved incapable of receiving a fresh impression on the subject. He asserted confidently that though he had suffered deeply, he had stood firm against all the enticements of his own weakness. Never making any question about his own actions, or doubting his own motives, he was sensible of some surprise that they

could possibly have been misunderstood. With a not unnatural petulance he pondered a good deal upon what he chose to consider the disadvantages of his lot; taking for granted, with a simplicity and composure which staggered David, that he had been the victim of circumstances, and was entirely deserving of commiseration. He persisted to the end in treating Crowhurst as an outsider, a mere spectator in the tragic drama in which he had himself been the chief actor, and never acknowledged that his wife's cousin had been intimately concerned therewith. Through all the farmer continued patient, though he failed to comprehend a temperament inaccessible to reason and moral force; it was hard for him to believe in a perverse will.

A little relief from suffering, a slight sense of comfort, were sufficient to divert the sick man from serious thought; he was far too deeply concerned about his own sensations and physical ailments to permit his thoughts to dwell much upon his own shortcomings. Reuben Raeburn died without much suffering, but also without any intensification of feeling, or remorse for the harm he had wrought. But when David looked down at the dead face of the man whom he had once so bitterly hated, he prayed from the depths of his strong, faithful, loyal heart:

"Lord, pity him, and put his sins far away from him. Thank God that He had mercy upon me, and helped me to forgive him!"

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CHAPTER I. A BEGINNING.

THE dense darkness of a winter's night lay over all the country side. Beneath that still and solemn curtain, which hushes and covers up all those mute evidences of the restless energy of man, which spring up about him wherever his tent is pitched, the landscape lay hidden. All through the night the rain fell with a quiet monotony of sound. But at last it ceased. There was a short interval in which darkness and silence seemed to become one principle; and then—a just perceptible lightening of the darkness rather than a distinct revelation of light—the first grey glimmer of dawn made itself apparent. A little shivering, creaking sound swept through the wintry trees as though life, becoming visible, became audible also; and the light slowly strengthened.

Emerging into ghostly distinctness, the first shape to become definite, as it rose up solid amid the wavering trees, the outlines of a large house loomed through the twilight. The light was coming chill and

wan from a lead-coloured sky, and the old red-brick fabric, many-windowed, many-chimneyed, with ivy covering it here and there, stood out against the greyness, dignified, substantial, and sombre.

An air of isolation hung about it. On the side on which the light first fell, no sign of life, no sound or movement followed the late dawn. The borders beneath the windows looked bare, even for winter time; on the broad drive that swept up to the front door were no marks either of wheels or footprints; and on the wide lawn the grass grew long.

It was a house suggestive, in every simple, comfortable line, of happy human life. Nothing about its appearance suggested display. It might have been built two centuries before as the head-quarters from which a troop of boys and girls should go out into the world, to which they should look back from their own homes, later on, with loving gratitude for the happy youth it had sheltered. The fine old house had stood through the darkness of the night, its outline shrouded in the darkness that

enveloped it. It had stood through the past, and the life that had dwelt in it, the dramas, comedies, and tragedies which it had witnessed were wrapped in a deeper darkness still. And for that darkness there was, as yet, no dawn.

The full light of the day, a grey and cheerless light it was, seemed to come suddenly at last; and then the dignified stillness which brooded over the old house was disturbed. At the back of the house the garden adjoined a paddock, beyond which lay farm buildings. A man who had crossed this paddock opened the wicket gate that connected it with the garden, and went on towards the house. There was nothing alien to the desolate quiet of the scene about this one human presence, which suggested intrusion rather than familiarity.

The man opened a glass door which led from the garden into the house, with an assured touch, however, and pausing in a little back hall to take off his hat and coat, walked on with the step of the master. Seen without his overcoat, he was a man above middle height, slightly made. His face was thin and pale, and there was that unmistakeable something about face and bearing that marks the townsman rather than the countryman. His most noticeable characteristic, however, was the expression in his eyes. They were brown, like the hair which was not so plentiful as it had been, though its owner's age could have been little more than five-and-thirty. And they were the eyes of a sympathetic, kindly spectator of human life rather than a sharer in it. There were lines of care about the face, and lines suggestive of ill-health. But they seemed to present themselves rather as accidents; the expression of the humorous and observant eyes utterly ignored them.

He crossed a great hall, strangely suggesting in its bareness and coldness that it should have been a comfortably appointed "house place," and entered a room at the further side.

It was a large room, and it was very solidly and substantially furnished as far as the bare necessities of a dining-room are concerned. At one end was a great sideboard; facing it, at the other end, was a massive dinner-waggon. The centre of the room was occupied by a dining-table at which twelve people could easily have been accommodated, and heavy dining-room chairs stood against the walls. The wide hearth was proportioned to the size of the

room, and the three long windows which faced the door had each their pair of crimson velvet curtains. But on this foundation the poorest possible superstructure was raised. Sideboard and dinner-waggon were absolutely bare; a small tablecloth laid at one end of the table had a humiliated appearance, as though it were ashamed of the modest tea equipage for two, the piece of cold bacon, the loaf and the butter set forth upon it. A fire which did no credit to the grate was sparkling timidly on the tiles.

Standing before the fire, with one foot on the fender, was a little woman, who looked as much out of keeping with her surroundings as did the breakfast and the fire, though no consciousness of the fact appeared in her demeanour. She was very slightly made, and something about the alert face, intent upon the perusal of a letter that she held in her hand, seemed to indicate that her natural tendency to spareness had been accentuated by a life of care and over-work. The black eyes were sharp and anxious, and there were lines in the forehead which were out of proportion to the still youthful figure. The soft, wavy black hair was brushed back from her face and twisted into the ugly knob which women only achieve when the worries of life have obliterated their sense of the becoming. She was dressed in a shabby black gown, neat at every point, and almost equally thread-bare. She started as the door opened, and folded the letter, turning with a quick, brisk movement. There was a flush on her cheeks as of excitement, or even triumph.

"Are you wet, Stafford?" she said. "Did you wipe your boots? How's the cow?"

She seated herself before the teapot as she spoke, laying her letter, with two or three more, beside her, and her husband stood before the fire.

"I did wipe my boots, Kit," he said. He spoke in a pleasant, leisurely way, which bore out the impression of impersonal interest in life conveyed by his face. "The cow, I am sorry to say, is dead."

The composure with which he announced the fact was in striking contrast with his wife's reception of it. The lines of care deepened suddenly all over her face until it looked quite haggard.

"Dead!" she said. "Oh, Stafford! Five-and-twenty pounds!" She paused, and then continued as she poured out a cup of tea: "It's Peter's fault, I'm sure! I don't believe she ought to have died at all!

I don't believe he knows anything about cows."

Her husband seated himself and drew the bread towards him.

"I don't think he does," he said quietly. "But then, you see, Kit, neither do I."

There was a moment's pause, during which Mrs. Ray contemplated her husband, as he applied himself to his breakfast, with a certain irritation in her expression mingled with an oddly tender concern. Then she glanced at the letters by her side.

"That makes it the more certain," she said, "that we must make some money somehow. There's no doubt about that!"

There was a note of triumphant anticipation in her voice. But her husband did not appear to notice it.

"There's no doubt of the necessity," he returned. "The possibility is the point. I should be very pleased to set about it, Kit, if you'll show me how."

Mrs. Ray leant back in her chair with a movement of irrepressible pride.

"I have!" she cried. "That is just exactly the very thing I have done. Read that, and that, and that!" She made a hasty selection among her letters, and handed him four sheets of letter-paper. Then, as he received them with an odd glance at her, she added in the tone of one who revels in the anticipated hearing, "Read them aloud!"

"DEAR MADAM,—I have seen your advertisement and it will give me much pleasure to avail myself of the opportunity you offer. I should propose to become your guest on the terms you name from December the twentieth until the following Saturday week. I enclose references according to your request, and beg to remain, faithfully yours, "ANNE LUCAS."

Stafford Ray read the letter through quietly, and then turned to his wife with an expression of blank incomprehension.

"It's a very courteous letter," he said; "and what does it mean?"

"Read the rest!"

He took up the next, a square sheet, bearing a strong handwriting.

"DEAR MADAM,—Having seen your advertisement of the twenty-eighth instant, I beg to inform you that I desire to avail myself of your hospitality, on the terms you name—five guineas a week—for one week, dating from December twentieth. Enclosed please find references. I shall, doubtless, be favoured with those you offer. Yours truly, "JOHN THURSTAN."

Stafford Ray took up the two remaining sheets, one in either hand, and read on.

"DEAR MADAM,—I have seen your advertisement with reference to the Christmas holidays. I should very much like to be your guest for a week or ten days. I should like to come on the twenty-first of December. I enclose my references. I am sorry to trouble you for those you offer, but I shall be grateful if you will oblige me with them. Sincerely yours,

"MINA CHESTER."

"DEAR MADAM,—If you can take me in from December the twenty-first to January the sixth, I shall be glad to come to you. Kindly let me know particulars as to the shooting. References enclosed. Faithfully yours, "RALPH IRELAND."

Stafford Ray folded the letters deliberately together and looked at his wife.

"Are many more ladies and gentlemen thirsting for the honour of our acquaintance?" he enquired. "This is almost what one might call waking to find oneself famous."

The serene gravity of his tone did not conceal its ironical humour, and Mrs. Ray flushed.

"Don't be foolish, Stafford," she said. "I've no doubt; there will be plenty more. But this is enough for a beginning."

"Yes," assented her husband. "But of what is it the beginning?"

His wife surveyed him with an expression of conscious pride.

"They are paying guests," she announced. "Stafford, you don't mean to say you'd forgotten? I told you a month ago that I'd read a suggestion in one of the ladies' papers about them. It said that there must be a great many people who would like to see family life in the country, and a great many people with country houses who might add to their incomes by inviting guests of this kind. I told you all about it, and I said what a capital time Christmas would be for the purpose; so many people don't know anything about Christmas in the country."

"So many people don't want to," interposed her husband.

"That's a great mistake," she continued triumphantly. "You see, there are people only too glad of the opportunity. I advertised, as you see in—"

"How did you describe the position?" interrupted her husband. There was an odd tenderness in his eyes as they regarded

her, but his brows were drawn sharply together. "Did you say that a husband and wife, inhabiting a large house which they were unable to keep up, would be glad of help in the farm work, etc., and would have pleasure in sharing the humblest possible fare with their assistants?"

"No, Stafford, I didn't," Mrs. Ray spoke with perhaps excessive firmness. "I said that a lady and gentleman living in a fine old house in a picturesque part of England would be glad to receive as guests two or three ladies and gentlemen, desirous of becoming acquainted with the country customs of the Christmas season. And I said that a nominal charge of five guineas a week would be made. Oh, Stafford!" Mrs. Ray rose suddenly and her voice shook in its deprecating eagerness; "there wasn't anything untrue in it, there really wasn't! I shall have Mrs. Jones in from the village to help Sarah, and I'll make it all as comfortable as possible! It's only for a fortnight, and we can have snapdragon and a Yule log, and put up holly and things, and I'm sure Mr. Lloyd will let us take them to the school treat, and oh, it will bring in something at any rate!"

Her husband looked up into her face with his own very pitiful.

"Kitty," he said, "my poor little Kit, it won't answer. You can't make it like the real thing. And the people themselves can't be the real thing either, don't you see, or they wouldn't want to come. My dear, it won't do."

"It shall do!" she returned vehemently. "I'll make it do. They've answered now, and we must try, at any rate. Oh, Stafford, you will help me, won't you?"

Stafford Ray rose and put one hand gently on her shoulder.

"I believe we should help one another best, Kitty," he said slowly, "if we could face the fact that our being here at all is a failure. We stave it off from month to month, but we shall have to give it up."

With a sudden movement, very unlike her usual quickness, his wife pressed close against him, every line of her face quivering as with a sudden shock of terrible anticipation.

"No!" she cried passionately. "You shan't go back, Stafford, you shan't! you shan't!"

CHAPTER II. THE FIRST ARRIVAL.

THE unexpected inheritance of a fine old country place looks at the outset like a stroke of unalloyed good fortune. When

the inheritor happens to be a man whom a course of unremunerative toil in a manufacturing city has brought to a state of health in which town life means certain death, the providential character of the gift seems hardly measureable.

There are, unfortunately, two sides from which every position is to be regarded. Stafford Ray had inherited the estate of High Firs in Cheshire, some twelve months before, as heir-at-law of a relative whose face he had never beheld. This gentleman, whose occupations had been of a speculative nature, had himself bought High Firs, fired with a desire to become a country gentleman, on an occasion when fortune had smiled upon him conspicuously. Fortune apparently had disapproved of this ambition, for she never smiled again; and when her devotee died, he left nothing, except the place in Cheshire, for the disposal of which he had not considered it worth while to arrange by will.

Stafford Ray was a man to whom life had denied those opportunities for the development of which his best parts seemed to have been created. For the finer qualities of his nature, there was no use in the sphere in which his lot was cast. He never realised the fact; perhaps a touch of indolence in his temperament increased his tendency to take things as they came. He simply sat rather loosely to life, doing his work well; bearing his burdens courageously; but taking no vivid interest in the matter. He had married young, a wife who was his very antithesis. The first years of their married life had been comfortable and uneventful. Then the shadow of ill-health fell on their home. Stafford Ray broke down again and again. He had to give up the position he had held in a large firm of solicitors. And his struggle with lighter work resulted at last in a serious illness, which brought upon him a medical verdict to the effect that in country life lay his only chance of health.

It was at this moment that he came into possession of High Firs. The first idea was, of course, that he should let the place, but unsuccessful efforts in that direction had already been in progress for nearly two years when it came to him. Urged by the eagerness of his wife, and by his own inability to see any other course open to him, he decided to try the experiment of living on his estate, and making an income by farming the land. As far as health was concerned, the experi-

ment had proved brilliantly successful. The husband and wife had taken possession in March, and during the spring and summer that ensued, Stafford Ray had grown stronger week by week. But farming is a pursuit to which only the ignorant apply themselves without capital; and against ignorance and want of ready money, all the perseverance in the world avails, in this line of life, nothing. Stafford Ray made mistakes, did his best to rectify them, worked early and late, and accepted the total absence of results with composure. His wife toiled and managed, keeping the small household together she herself alone could have told how. And it was not until the winter months brought with them slowly, but surely, the certainty that the experiment was a failure, that her spirits grew sharp, and her face haggard with care.

It mattered not at all to Catherine Ray with how hard a struggle she made her two ends meet; if only she could see her husband strong and well. It was the dread of finding herself at last without resource against that return to town life which had become the bugbear of her existence, that strained her courage almost beyond endurance. If they should have to leave High Firs, no possible means of subsistence offered itself but a return to some form or other of the work to which Stafford Ray had been trained. And every fibre in the resolute little woman was accordingly set and braced to fight the battle to the last, to leave no stone unturned by which the barest living might be wrested from their present surroundings.

The sword that hung over the husband and wife; which had for the first time received definite shape in the words with which Stafford Ray had passed from the discussion of the new means of money-making concocted by Catherine's desperately eager brain; was not again alluded to by either of the pair. But, as though the thoughts of both needed active occupation, the subject of the expected guests became all dominating as Mrs. Ray flung herself into the preparations for their reception. The crowds of applicants which had loomed before the hostess's eager vision, when she received the first answers to her advertisement, did not take upon themselves substantial form. The four letters that she had received together, were the only ones that came, and four people only were expected.

"And if four people involve such an expenditure of energy," said Stafford Ray,

one day, "what would have become of us if fourteen people had responded to your expansive overtures?"

He was standing in the doorway of the large drawing-room as he spoke, looking down upon his wife as she struggled with a billowy mass of old-fashioned chintz with which she proposed to clothe the dilapidated furniture ranged about her. The "plenishing" of High Firs was of a rather erratic description. The possessor from whom Stafford Ray had inherited the house, had bought with it a considerable quantity of its furniture from the original owner. A great deal of this had been sold before the Rays came into possession, and a great ransacking of the premises had taken place before any possibility of furnishing the drawing-room at all had presented itself.

"I have made one discovery for the benefit of the trusting four, however," Stafford Ray continued. "The wine-cellar isn't absolutely cleared out, after all. There's no variety, but as far as sherry goes, the lodgers will be all right."

"That's a comfort," responded his wife, with preoccupied fervour. "If it wasn't for Mrs. Jones, we really should do beautifully. She says she can't go about the house without her bonnet, because she never has. And superior servants never wear bonnets in the house!"

"Then, as people in our exalted position wouldn't be likely to keep inferior servants, we must be supposed to indulge in an eccentric treasure. She is a treasure, you know. You've often said so."

"Yes," assented Mrs. Ray dubiously. "She really can cook; and I shall see after everything myself. There's next to nothing to do about the farm just now, and you'll be able to look after the men all the time. And I expect the two ladies will amuse one another."

"I don't think they are likely to want for amusement," returned her husband. "They're going to have an experience quite unique in its way. And I shouldn't be surprised if our experience was equally striking."

But if he allowed himself an occasional sarcastic anticipation, Stafford Ray submitted to the inevitable, as he had done throughout his life, and set himself to further his wife's wishes wherever his man's strength and capacity could be of service. He laughed at the fair show of order into which he contrived to bring the garden and lawns, calling it a "fraud of the first water." The triumphs of carpentering with which he

supplemented the deficiencies of the fine old bedrooms, were the objects of his most ironical observations. He never told his wife by what transaction in live-stock he stocked the store cupboard and larder.

"And really," said Mrs. Ray, when the long-expected twentieth of December came at last, "things don't look so bad, now, do they, Stafford?"

It was half-past two in the afternoon, and they were standing together in the great hall before a blazing fire. The hall was bare no longer. A heavy curtain shut off the front door and effectually excluded all draughts. Infinite contrivance had produced short window curtains of the same dark stuff, and bright cushions lay on the broad, low window seat. A quaint round table, daintily laid for five o'clock tea, stood near the foot of the staircase. Mrs. Ray herself was as much brightened in appearance as was her hall. After much careful inspection of the three shabby little gowns that constituted her wardrobe, she had decided that a new dress was an imperative necessity of the situation. She had made it herself with much care and flutter of spirits; and the fact that she was thus wearing new attire for the first time for nearly three years, added to the excitement and satisfaction with which her eyes sparkled. So unusual a state of things, however, had made her a little nervous, and there was something agitated and appealing in her eyes as she turned them at last to her husband. He smiled at her reassuringly.

"It looks capital, little woman," he said. "I hardly know the place. Now then, let's rehearse the programme. Miss Lucas's train is due at three-ten. The station fly is to meet her, and she'll be here by four o'clock. Colonel Thurstan arrives at Newton"—Newton was the market town some seven miles distant—"at four-fifty; and I'm to be off now, execute a list of commissions, meet him, and bring him back. That's all, I think?"

"That's all," she assented absently. "Stafford, you don't think the ottoman under the drawing-room window will give way when it's sat upon, do you?"

"I'm quite sure nothing will give way," he said, patting her on the shoulder. "Kit," he continued, with a slight smile, glancing round the old hall as he spoke, "I wonder what the old house thinks of it? The gentleman up there would have been rather surprised at the use to which his house would be put if he could have known it, wouldn't he?"

He pointed as he spoke to the portrait of a man in the dress of two hundred years ago, which was painted on a panel over the fireplace. It was the portrait of the man by whom the house had been built—a certain Gervase Woodroffe—by whose descendants the place had only been sold about twelve years before. It was a poor painting enough, but there was character of a spirited kind about the face represented, nevertheless. And Stafford Ray's eyes were somewhat in the habit of wandering to it. Mrs. Ray, however, was not imaginative, and she answered rather crisply:

"It's a very good use, I'm sure," she said. "I don't see why any one should be surprised. Stafford, don't you think you ought to start?"

Her impatience for his departure was the result solely of nervousness. And when her husband had driven off, a very unusual fever of the spirits took possession of Mrs. Ray. It was quite unlike her to distress herself with possible agitating contingencies. But, through the work and thought that she had expended on the scheme which was now to become an accomplished fact, it had gradually assumed to her proportions of almost overwhelming magnitude. The innumerable devices by which the poverty that reigned at High Firs was to be concealed, the innocent little deceptions which were to create a genial air of ease and festivity, were not a point of personal pride only with her. It seemed to her that on them Stafford's whole future life was to turn. And as the hour drew near that was to put them to the test, they rose before her, a glaring regiment of failures. There was nothing more that she could do; everything was as ready as her hands could make it; and her quick, nervous progress from room to room afforded her no occupation. Her thoughts began to busy themselves with the formidable arrival that every moment was bringing nearer. And the dreadful possibility that Miss Lucas might be "very particular" or very prim, assumed for her the complexion of a certainty. She was giving a last dissatisfied glance at Miss Lucas's bedroom, when she heard the lumbering approach of the fly, and hastened downstairs, outwardly alert and composed, but with her heart beating with painful rapidity.

She had just reached the foot of the stairs and was looking towards the door, opened by the stalwart village girl whose services were to be supplemented by Mrs.

Jones, when a woman's figure appeared on the threshold and came towards her with a swift step.

"Mrs. Ray!" said the first of her four guests. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance! How fortunate I am to have so fine a day."

There was no single point about the newcomer which touched any one of the preconceived notions that her hostess had formed of Miss Lucas. She was not old—not more than middle-aged; she was very handsome, and she was far from prim. These bare facts alone impressed themselves instantly on Mrs. Ray's brain, and somewhat confused her greeting.

"I am very glad to see you, Miss Lucas," she said. "It is warm, isn't it? Won't you come to the fire?"

But Miss Lucas did not seem to notice any want of self-possession about her hostess. She had not glanced about her as she entered the hall, and the fact that she kept her eyes from wandering from Mrs. Ray's face seemed to be due to a certain effort of self-control. She moved towards the fire, leaving her luggage to its fate with the carelessness of a woman accustomed to be waited on. Mrs. Ray, however, was unable to share her guest's confidence in the powers of the driver of the station fly. With a hurried little "Excuse me," she went out to emphasize her directions as to back door and back stairs, leaving her guest alone in the old hall.

Miss Lucas did not avail herself of her moment's solitude for any inspection of her surroundings. On the contrary, she stretched out one hand with an odd certainty of movement, and resting it on the high, narrow mantelpiece, pressed her face for a moment against her arm. Then, as the sound of footsteps caught her ear, she drew herself up and stood facing the door as Mrs. Ray came round the curtains into the hall.

She was a tall woman, and so well proportioned, so graceful and self-possessed, that poor little Mrs. Ray suddenly became conscious of all the innocent little shifts arranged for her deception as something absolutely criminal. Her features were irregular, and the complexion of youth was gone. But nose, brow, and chin were alike charming in their way; strong, sensitive, and sympathetic. She had large, dark blue eyes, and a certain wistfulness which, mingled with their shrewd humour, seemed rather inconsistent with the lines that time had traced about them—lines of laughter

rather than pain. She had magnificent auburn hair, soft tendrils of which curled about her temples, and her whole appearance was instinct with vitality, physical and mental. Even the movements with which she unloosed the beautiful furs she wore spoke of impulse and possibly of self-will. She scanned Mrs. Ray as the latter approached her with a keen glance, and then her lips and eyes smiled pleasantly.

"Arrivals are always a nuisance, are they not?" she said. "But don't let me be more trouble to you than you can help. One doesn't expect things to go by machinery in the country; one has enough of that in town."

A vague possibility suddenly dawned in Mrs. Ray that the instability of the ottoman in the drawing-room was of no great consequence after all. Something also suggested to her for the first time that it was not unpleasant to see somebody strange. The thought gave to her manner a pretty touch of genuine, unconscious hospitality as she approached the tea-table, and said gratefully:

"It's very kind of you to say that! You'll have some tea, won't you? It's refreshing after a journey."

"I am used to travelling," returned her guest, "I like it. But a cup of tea will be delightful. You are not such a gad-about as I am, perhaps?"

Mrs. Ray shook her head.

"I've not travelled at all," she said. "We talked of going to the Rhine five years ago—it was all settled; but then my husband was ill, and we couldn't."

"You look upon it as only put off, though," said Miss Lucas pleasantly. Her blue eyes were covertly observant of the little thin, hardworked hands so busy with the teapot. "Just as I am always putting off the time when I shall settle in England for good. It's a good thing to have something to look forward to!"

She laughed, and the musical sound was infectious, though Mrs. Ray shook her head as she echoed it.

"I don't know," she said. "I think sometimes that we shall never go. Won't you have some cake, Miss Lucas?"

The duty of making conversation had been quite forgotten by Mrs. Ray, and she had been speaking easily and spontaneously. But the attitude of hostess involved in handing her guest tea, apparently brought back a sense of the exigencies of the situation, and a moment's pause ensued. Miss Lucas made no attempt

to break it. A little shadow as of pre-occupation seemed to have fallen upon her. She drank her tea abstractedly, and Mrs. Ray realised that it behoved her to speak. The sense of duty engendered a rather stiff little manner.

"Country life is quite new to you, I suppose," she said. "Very few people know how pleasant the country is in the winter, I think. We quite hoped last week for some old-fashioned Christmas weather, but unfortunately it has turned quite mild again."

There was a touch of apology in her voice, and it seemed to rouse Miss Lucas, whose eyes twinkled a little as she said: "Thank you, I prefer mild weather."

"I think you will admire the house," said Mrs. Ray, acting up to her part, as she conceived it. "This old hall, for instance, some people consider very fine."

As though in response to the tacit demand thus made on her, Miss Lucas turned for the first time, and looked round. She made no comment. Even when her gaze had travelled lingeringly round from the portrait over the mantelpiece back to the fire, there was a perceptible pause before she spoke. Then she said briefly:

"It is very pretty."

Mrs. Ray was conscious of a chill. The hall was one of the most characteristic parts of the house. Her hostess-like manner became stiffer and more diffident.

"You will like to hear about our party," she said.

Miss Lucas turned towards her quickly.

"Have you other guests?" she said.

Mrs. Ray drew herself up. "Certainly," she said. "My husband and I being, as you know, alone here, could hardly offer you the advantages of family life unassisted. We are expecting three other guests."

Miss Lucas looked back again at the fire. "Ah, yes," she said, "quite so. And when do my fellow guests arrive?"

"Two of them arrive to-morrow," answered her hostess. "My husband has now driven in to our market-town, at which the express stops, to fetch Colonel Thurstan."

"To fetch—"

With an incredibly abrupt movement, Miss Lucas had turned her head and was looking full into Mrs. Ray's face. She paused a moment, the colour that had retreated from her face came gradually back to it, as she stretched out one hand to serve as a fire-screen for her face.

"Whom did you say you expected?" she asked.

"Colonel Thurstan," repeated Mrs. Ray very distinctly. "His train is just due," she added, glancing at the clock.

"Colonel Thurstan?" repeated Miss Lucas in an odd tone, "ah!"

She paused, and then said: "I knew some Thurstans once. Do you happen to know his Christian name or his regiment?"

"I don't know his regiment," said Mrs. Ray. Something in her guest's demeanour brought a touch of surprise into her voice. "But his Christian name is John."

"Ah."

It was hardly more than a sharply-caught breath, but it bewildered Mrs. Ray. She could think of nothing to say for a moment or two.

"Colonel Thurstan is a friend of yours, I suppose?"

The words, rather strangely spoken, restored Mrs. Ray to ground that she understood.

"As you yourself are a friend of ours," she said politely. "I have still Colonel Thurstan's acquaintance to make. Would you like to go to your room?"

The last words were induced by the fact that Miss Lucas had risen suddenly from her chair. She started slightly as Mrs. Ray paused for her reply, and apparently gathered the sense of the words with some difficulty.

"Thanks," she said, "I think I should."

None of the little difficulties that Mrs. Ray had foreseen in the introduction of her guest to the room prepared for her took place. The hostess found herself, indeed, thinking that her guest might with advantage take a little more notice of the arrangements made for her comfort. Miss Lucas asked only one question—as to the hour of dinner; and then Mrs. Ray was obliged to leave her.

"Won't she come down again till dinner-time, I wonder?" thought the latter. "Well, it gives me nice time in the kitchen, but it's a little dull. I wish Stafford would make haste with Colonel Thurstan. I suppose he's not the man she thought he might be, as she didn't say any more. I wish they'd come."

Colonel Thurstan's train was obviously very late, however, and by the time her male guest arrived under her husband's escort, all Mrs. Ray's energies were concentrated on reconciling the incompatible necessities of superintending the dishing-up of the dinner in the kitchen, and awaiting its announcement in the drawing-room.

Stafford Ray was in the drawing-room

when she appeared, a little flushed and breathless, on the very stroke of the dinner-hour. Stafford had introduced himself to Miss Lucas when she appeared, five minutes earlier, and was finding her a little absent and difficult to talk to. Colonel Thurstan had not yet come down.

"Thurstan assured me that he would not keep us waiting," said Stafford Ray; "but I hope Miss Lucas will forgive me when I say that I told him not to hurry."

But Miss Lucas did not appear to hear the words. She had turned her head abruptly, and seemed to be listening. The next instant the door opened, and a tall, thin man, clean-shaven and with grey hair, came down the room towards them. His host and hostess moved with one consent to meet him.

"Let me introduce you to my wife," said Stafford Ray courteously.

They shook hands, a grave apology and a quick disclaimer passed between them, and then Mrs. Ray turned. Miss Lucas was standing in shadow with her back towards them.

"Miss Lucas, may I introduce Colonel Thurstan?"

At the first word, the soldierly-looking figure had started slightly, and followed the direction of his hostess's eyes with a keen glance.

Miss Lucas turned slowly, almost reluctantly, and a sharp exclamation, incredulous, almost incoherent, broke from her fellow guest. With her head erect, her dark blue eyes burning strangely, and her very lips pale, Miss Lucas came forward.

"Colonel Thurstan and I are old acquaintances," she said icily.

CHAPTER III. FELLOW GUESTS.

"WELL, Stafford?"

"Well, Kit?"

The voice came through the open doorway from Stafford Ray's dressing-room, towards which his wife had turned, as she stood brushing her hair before the place where her looking-glass would have stood save for the fact that it was temporarily ensconced in Miss Lucas's apartment. The first evening was over; and host, hostess, and guests had retired to their rooms. Mrs. Ray placed her brush upon her table with a vindictive bang.

"I think you might say more than that, Stafford," she said.

"I think we've had a truly delightful evening."

"It's all gone off very well," she retorted defiantly. "I'm sure the dinner was beautiful! And if Martha did make one or two mistakes, neither of them seemed to notice; and the drawing-room looked as nice as possible."

"It looked most cheerful."

The quiet assent was almost sardonic, and Mrs. Ray faced round suddenly.

"Stafford," she said, "don't be so horrid! You might tell me what was the matter! Oh, and everything did go off so well, too!"

Her face was flushed, there were actually tears in her eyes, and the tremble in her voice brought her husband quickly to the dressing-room door.

"Nothing could have been better, Kitty," he said. "It's an unexpected hitch that has thrown things out."

"One couldn't foresee that they would know one another before and dislike one another!" she said piteously.

"No," assented Stafford. "But it's rather a drag on Christmas festivity, isn't it?"

"They don't seem able to speak to one another," said Mrs. Ray ruefully. "They don't even look at one another! Perhaps it's only the first shock, though, Stafford. And I'm sure it must be his fault. She's so nice. She was as friendly as possible till she heard he was coming. Oh, why couldn't he be somebody else?"

Her husband wrinkled up his forehead thoughtfully.

"I don't know about that," he said. "He struck me as being an uncommonly good sort of fellow. I don't know when I've taken to a man so much. I assure you, I had half a notion that your plan wasn't such a bad one by the time I'd driven him home. No; it's her fault, Kit, I've no doubt."

"Perhaps one of them will go away," suggested his wife despairingly. "Oh, wouldn't that be dreadful, Stafford?"

"It may be more dreadful if they both stay," he said. "But things may look better in the morning. Hope for the best, little woman."

Mrs. Ray's fears as to the possible departure of one, at least, of her guests would have been relieved if she could have heard the half audible words which were at that very moment issuing from Miss Lucas's lips.

"It's for him to go away, not for me. He can do as he likes, of course. I shall stay! I shall stay! I shall stay!"

Though more than an hour had elapsed since she had shut the door of her room, Miss Lucas had made no change in her dress. She was pacing rapidly up and down, her hands clenched, her eyes flashing, as if under the influence of some strong excitement. She stopped abruptly, as though the sound of her own voice on the silence had arrested the current of her thoughts. Then with a fresh impulse, she went to the window and drew up the blind. The moon was going down, but there was light enough to show the grounds over which the window looked, and Miss Lucas stood there gazing out. Her face was very strange to see. Her eyes were not the eyes of a woman who is receiving new impressions, but of one who is carried by what she sees back into the past. And across the retrospective background thus created, wildly incongruous passions struggled; yearning regret, passionate tenderness, passionate anger, and a strange questioning which seemed to pervade them all.

Moments passed, and still she stood there. At last she dashed down the blind and turned away. She threw herself on her knees, and her whole figure was shaken from head to foot.

"Oh, Gervase!" she cried, below her breath, "My poor Gervase! My poor Gervase!"

There was no sign of tempest, however, about Miss Lucas's manner when she came down to breakfast on the following morning. The charm of manner which had attracted Mrs. Ray on her arrival was in full force; a little impulsive, perhaps, but quite irresistible to the anxious little hostess. The fact that she entirely ignored the presence of her fellow guest rendered it inevitable that her host should devote himself to the latter, who would otherwise have eaten his breakfast in absolute silence. It was a pouring wet morning, and the prospect looked cheerless to both husband and wife, when Stafford Ray, breakfast being over, said to Colonel Thurstan:

"I am exceedingly sorry, but I have to be out all day. I am obliged to go on business to a village about ten miles off. I had intended to suggest that you might like the drive, but, of course, that's out of the question, under these circumstances."

For a moment Colonel Thurstan hesitated, then he said, quietly:

"Thanks, don't trouble about me; I have some letters to write, and I shall employ myself easily."

His voice and manner as he spoke, though they were grave—far graver, as Stafford Ray knew, than his demeanour had been during the drive on the previous day—were very pleasant. His face was pleasant, too; the thin features were well-cut and noticeably honest in expression. He had brown eyes, clear and straightforward, though always a little sad. And Mrs. Ray, meeting them as he looked towards her, thought to herself that he really looked very nice if only he had not been so tiresome as to have known Miss Lucas before.

Miss Lucas herself turned to her hostess.

"May I ensconce myself in the drawing-room?" she said, with a smile that made Mrs. Ray think entertaining people the easiest pursuit in the world. "I armed myself against wet days with a large piece of embroidery that is some day to be a fire-screen. And you have things to attend to, of course."

It was a very beautiful piece of needlework with which Miss Lucas seated herself alone in the drawing-room; and the careless skill with which she proceeded with it, harmonising with a certain rich picturesqueness that characterised her dress, suggested an artistic temperament. But her industry that morning seemed to be rather a pose. She worked fitfully for about an hour, and then she rose, and began to wander about the room. She was standing by the window watching the rain, when the door opened and she turned with a start. It was Colonel Thurstan, and as he shut the door and advanced into the room, she turned her back upon him deliberately, and sat down to her embroidery frame. Colonel Thurstan walked to a table that stood in one of the windows and took up a book.

Five minutes passed; the fire crackled, Miss Lucas's needle clicked with monotonous regularity as it passed to and fro; and Colonel Thurstan turned page after page. His book was upside down, but the sad brown eyes that rested on it were obviously unaware of the fact. His mouth was resolutely set. Another five minutes passed. The regular click of Miss Lucas's needle was suspended. She had lifted her eyes, unconsciously as it seemed, and they were resting on the thin figure sharply outlined against the blurred window-frame, with that questioning of the night before strong in them. Then they flashed fiercely, and she bent her head again.

"You are living in Rome, I understand."

Colonel Thurstan did not lift his eyes from his book as he spoke. For an instant it was obviously doubtful whether or no Miss Lucas would answer. Then she said with freeing conciseness:

"I am living in Rome."

The conversation thus opened did not flourish. There was another silence, and again Miss Lucas looked up at her fellow guest.

"Have you been ill?" she said brusquely.

"No, thank you," he responded coldly. Then he closed his book suddenly, laid it on the table, and came towards her.

"Anne," he said, "we meet most unexpectedly, and through no wish of our own. But we meet for the first time for fifteen years. And the common questions and answers used by the merest chance acquaintances may surely pass between us. Tell me something of yourself."

She did not speak for a moment, but her needle was making vague tracings on the soft satin.

"What is there to tell?" she said. Her voice was cold still, but much less certain. "My life is the life of dozens of other women. I paint a little, interfere with other people's business a little, and amuse myself a great deal."

"Have you been in England for long?"

"Two months," she answered. She paused, and then said slowly: "Your life is likely to have been more eventful than mine. Are you still in India?"

"No," he answered. "I have been obliged to come home."

"The climate?" she said. She looked up as she spoke, and he bent his head. "Otherwise you have done well, I believe?"

"Yes," he said indifferently.

There was another silence, and Colonel Thurstan sat down in a low chair facing her, fixing his eyes on the ground.

"Why have you come here, Anne?" he said.

The words were spoken very gently, and they seemed to penetrate the armour in which Miss Lucas had entrenched herself, and to touch something within. She did not answer for a moment. Her face had flushed, and the curl of her sensitive lips was softened.

"I don't know," she said. "A whim, I suppose. I saw the advertisement—by chance of course—and I felt that I must see it all again. Why are you here?"

"For auld lang syne," he said, in a low voice.

He rose and walked away to the window, standing with his back to her for a moment. Then he turned and looked round the room with a sad smile.

"Poor old place," he said, "how changed it is!"

There was a suspicious tremble in the little laugh with which Miss Lucas prefaced her answer.

"I was prepared for makeshifts," she said. "Old Mr. Smith found out about these people for me, when it came into my head to come. Poor souls, what a struggle it is! And what a plucky little body she is!"

But the man's sympathies were less quick than the woman's. And Colonel Thurstan was not capable at that moment of interest in the Rays.

"Yes," he said absently. Then he added gently: "Isn't it more than you can bear?"

She laughed again a little bitterly.

"Oh, no!" she said. "People of my age can bear a good deal. Practice, I suppose. One doesn't go in for strong feelings after thirty."

The contrast between the words and the emotional face of the speaker would have had a humorous aspect for any one with leisure to observe it. But Colonel Thurstan was not at leisure. He was evidently thinking, painfully. And when he spoke again it was in a low, hesitating voice.

"Anne," he said, "I've heard nothing for five years. Is there any news?"

She lifted her head sharply; a strange wave of feeling seemed to pass over her face and press out all the softer expression. Her voice rang hard as she said:

"What do you mean?"

"News of Gervase?"

The thread snapped short in Miss Lucas's hand. Her face had paled to the lips, and her eyes flashed with vindictive passion.

"Thank you," she said in a ringing voice, "you've brought me to my senses. Is it possible that I've allowed myself to talk to you—actually talk to you as though there were nothing between us! News of Gervase will never come now. Only, because I have lost him so long, I know he must be dead. Oh, Gervase!"

She stopped abruptly, but the emotion with which she was struggling seemed only to feed her fiery indignation. And she went on again almost instantly.

"That you and I should be in this house together," she said, "is an impossibility. An impossibility, I say! I leave

it to such good feeling as you possess to take you away. You will see that your presence is intolerable to me; that it makes what might have been a sad pleasure into a horrible mockery. You will go away at once!"

But as though the peremptoriness of her tone; or something deeper still that lay within her words; had stung him to the quick, Colonel Thurstan faced her, his face very pale, his steady eyes burning.

"No," he said, "I will not go. There is neither right nor justice in your treatment of me, Anne; as I said it when we parted I say it now. That which stands between us is the figment of your brain. The memories with which this house is haunted are common to us both—I claim my share of them. I will not go!"

"You will not!" Miss Lucas rose impetuously to her feet. "You will stay here, though your presence is hateful to me!"

"I have done nothing, nothing in all the many years we have known each other, to render it hateful to you," he retorted doggedly. "I will not go!"

What Miss Lucas might have said was never to be known. As they stood there facing one another, at the very crisis of their altercation, there was a stir in the hall outside, and a confusion of voices, and the door was flung open.

Two people, a young man and a girl, came into the room, and behind them, unspeakably perturbed, was Mrs. Ray.

"I am so sorry," she was saying, addressing the new-comers alternately collectively and individually. "So terribly distressed. I can't think how it can have happened. The postman didn't come this morning. He will shirk the walk sometimes when the weather's very bad, and I've always said that some day the letters would be important. Miss Lucas," she continued, appealing piteously to that lady as Colonel Thurstan turned and strode incontinently out of the room, "isn't it dreadful? Let me introduce Miss Chester, Miss Lucas; Mr. Ireland, Miss Lucas. I never had their letters, and they've had to walk all the way from Welldon in this pouring rain!"

CHAPTER IV. UNKNOWN GROUND.

A TALL girl, strongly built though slight, rather square-shouldered and long-limbed; a small head, with waving brown hair, neatly and plainly disposed of behind; a face rather more serious, rather

more womanly, than befitted its owner's obvious youth, with direct grey eyes, a smooth forehead, a pretty chin, square but rather short, and a pale complexion. This was Miss Chester, the third of Mrs. Ray's guests.

Twenty-four hours had elapsed since her unexpected arrival, and Miss Chester was walking up and down a garden path shut off by thick yew hedges. The sky was lowering; everything visible seemed to be saturated with moisture, except the girlish figure in its neat dress and coat of blue serge. It had rained unceasingly for a day and a night. The actual downfall had ceased only an hour before, and Mina Chester had slipped out of the house, unobserved, to get a breath of air before lunch. Her face, as she paced to and fro, was grave. She was evidently considering intently, and as obviously the subject of her meditation did not meet with her approval.

She lifted her head as a footstep sounded on the other side of the hedge; and as she saw the new-comer she smiled, not shyly, but with a serious, matter-of-course friendliness.

To travel in the same third-class compartment with a young man from London to Cheshire, even though the fact of a common destination transpires on the way, does not necessarily create a sense of fellowship, however pleasant and courteous the young man may be. But when the two people thus thrown together find themselves in a common dilemma; involving a considerable amount of enquiry and conjecture, and resulting in a five miles' walk; a familiarity is attained that many days of ordinary intercourse might have failed to bring about. The fact, too, that they presented themselves finally among people who were absolute strangers to both of them, accentuated the bond of union between the fellow-travellers.

Mr. Ralph Ireland, the final member of Mrs. Ray's house-party, was a fair-haired young man, of open countenance, a good deal bronzed; with shrewd blue eyes, and a capable-looking mouth, partly hidden by a fair moustache. There was something about his manner which was not quite that of the ordinary young Englishman; without being rough or familiar, it was unusually simple and frank. He had explained himself to Mina Chester during their walk of the previous day with naïve confidence and frankness. Australian born, of English parents, he had lived all his life in the colonies. He had been, he told her with

perfect simplicity, "rather an idle beggar," with not much turn for settling; and being entirely without family ties, he had been more or less without a profession when a small legacy brought him an opportunity of seeing the world. He had been seeing the world cheerily enough for the last two years, and his visit to High Firs was apparently part of the proceedings.

He lifted his hat, and passing under the low arch which led through the hedge, came up to where Mina Chester stood.

"It's not so bad, now, is it?" he said. "I hope it means to hold up. But it's rather damp for you, isn't it, Miss Chester?"

"I'm fond of fresh air," said Mina, as they began to walk up and down side by side, "and one can't get very much of it when one is hard at work in London."

There was a gentle sedateness about her manner which tacitly assumed the simplest equality between them. There was not the faintest thought of coquetry about it; but it attracted the young man strongly in its unlikeness to any form of girlishness that he had hitherto met.

"Are you always hard at work in London?" he said respectfully.

A pretty, rather patronising smile touched her lips.

"Of course," she said. "Very few women would like to be anything else, I think. I am a secretary."

"Yes," said her companion admiringly. "I think it's awfully jolly of you."

"Ah, that's because you don't understand," she said gently. "I like it very much, and I have been very fortunate to get such a good appointment. It's a great pity you've never worked, Mr. Ireland. You don't know how nice it is."

"Oh, I never said I hadn't worked!" he answered urgently. "I've never got into a groove exactly; but I've put in a good lot of work one way and another. You're quite right, I know; but I thought, perhaps, it was different for a woman."

"Oh, no," she answered; "why should it be?"

She paused and smiled—a little smile which the young man thought more charming than any laughter could have been.

"Perhaps we appreciate our holidays more," she said. "I look forward to mine very much."

"Do you always come into the country like this?" he said.

"I always go into the country if possible," she answered; "but I've never done anything quite like this before." She paused

again. There was a dubious, disapproving expression upon her face. "I don't know that I have been quite wise," she went on. "I don't feel sure that I shall like it."

She had turned her grey eyes towards him, as if a touch of uncertainty created in her an instinct towards expression, and he answered her look as much as her words.

"Perhaps—don't you think it is a mistake to make up one's mind too soon?" he suggested hesitatingly and delicately.

"Of course it is," she said. "But one can't help seeing things that one can't quite approve of. Mr. Ireland, did you think it would be this kind of thing?"

"I don't know that I thought much about it," he said cheerfully and confidentially. "I thought it would be a change, and I had a particular fancy for seeing this part of the country. I knew I had only to come away if it didn't turn out well."

"Yes," responded the girl. "Of course it doesn't make much difference to you; but it's my holiday, you see. Perhaps it was rather silly of me," she went on after a moment's silence; "but I hadn't anywhere to go this Christmas, and I thought it sounded nice, and—" she hesitated a little—"I wanted to come here. So I thought I would afford it. Of course I was very careful with references and all that kind of thing; but still——"

Again her eyes contained a mute appeal for his opinion.

"I think they're awfully nice, you know," he said eagerly. "Mr. Ray has been taking no end of trouble to make me understand things about the farm. Don't you like them, Miss Chester?"

"Yes," she said dubiously; "I suppose so. They seem to me to be nice. And yet—do you think the advertisement was quite honest?"

The young man coloured.

"Oh, well, I don't know," he said. "It seems a shame to find fault when they are so kind. I expect it's all right."

"It isn't right to pretend," said Mina, "and to try to make people think there is what there isn't. Why, the house isn't properly furnished!"

"Isn't it?" he returned; "I suppose I don't know much about furniture."

The words were accompanied by the sound of a dinner-bell, and as they made their way towards the house, Mina changed the subject.

The dining-room as they entered it certainly was not wholly undeserving of Miss Chester's strictures. What Mrs. Ray called

"a simple country lunch" was spread upon the long table, the necessary furnishing of which was not without neatly concealed deficiencies; and about the demeanour of the hostess there was a rather anxious cheeriness, as though she were not suspicious of Miss Chester's sentiments. Mina Chester and Ralph Ireland were not the last of the party to make their appearance. Colonel Thurstan was standing near the door, but Stafford Ray was not there, neither had Miss Lucas as yet come down. A rather awkward little pause ensued, during which Mrs. Ray and Miss Chester conversed politely but not easily, and Ralph Ireland tried to penetrate the preoccupation that enveloped Colonel Thurstan.

A few minutes later the host appeared, looking harassed in consequence of difficulties among the live-stock; and then the door opened again and Miss Lucas came in. She swept past Colonel Thurstan, not glancing in his direction, and round to her place at the other side of the room.

"Do forgive me, Mrs. Ray," she said, smiling with her charm of manner just a trifle accentuated, "I'd no idea how late it was. How abominable to have kept everybody waiting."

She glanced round the table as she spoke, and her eyes, reaching Mina Chester's face as the girl sat opposite to her, rested there. She had glanced at the girl, unconsciously, as it seemed, many times during the previous evening. And at breakfast-time her eyes had rested on the girlish features so lingeringly that Mina Chester had flushed and smiled back without knowing why.

"You have been out, have you not?" Miss Lucas said now. "I think I saw you in the garden. Didn't you find it very damp and cold?"

There was an unconscious response in the tone in which the girl answered to the elder woman's tacit advance.

"Oh no, thank you," she said. "The air is very nice, not cold at all."

"You are used to the country?"

Mina shook her head. "No," she said, "I've always lived in London; but I don't mind the weather."

A little hum of voices had risen between Colonel Thurstan, Ralph Ireland, and their hostess. Stafford Ray, finding Miss Lucas and Miss Chester in no need of entertainment, was glad to eat his lunch and digest his private worries in silence.

"You are a worker, I know," said Miss Lucas. "Do you go far every day between

your home and your business? Where do you live?"

"I have a room at a club," the girl answered, "a residential club, you know. It's so much more convenient than having to order things and look after things when one is out all day."

"Do you live quite alone, then?"

"Yes," said the girl simply. "I have no one to live with."

Miss Lucas's eyes were very compassionate, but she said playfully:

"No uncles, no cousins, no aunts? That seems a little isolated."

"I suppose it is," said the girl, smiling. "Most people have relations, haven't they? And I have some cousins, I believe, in Scotland. But there is no reason why I should live with them."

"Is there not?" said Miss Lucas gently.

"Isn't it lonely for you?"

"I never think about it," answered the girl. "I am quite used to it, you see."

Miss Lucas had asked her questions with a manner full of sympathetic interest. But before Mina Chester had finished speaking, the voices at the other end of the table seemed to have arrested her hearer's attention. The gentle curves of Miss Lucas's lips merged suddenly into a scornful line. She did not turn her head, but something in her attitude suggested to Mrs. Ray that she was listening to the second conversation, and with a gallant desire to draw all her guests together, her hostess addressed her briskly.

"What do you think, Miss Lucas?" she said. "We are talking of the difficulty of distinguishing between truth and falsehood. Colonel Thurstan seems to think that people may rely too much on facts, and that appearances are not always to be trusted."

"But I say, don't you know," put in Ralph Ireland cheerily—"and the discussion arose out of something I said, didn't it, Mrs. Ray?—that facts are facts, and that a man, however trustworthy he might have seemed, is always liable to go to pieces, no one knows how or why."

Colonel Thurstan had moved, as though to interrupt, on Mrs. Ray's first words.

"The discussion is not a particularly practical one," he said now, and his voice seemed to be unnecessarily steady and controlled.

"Colonel Thurstan's appreciation of facts would seem to the uninitiated to be peculiar to himself; and I agree with him that, under the circumstances, argument is useless."

Miss Lucas had not even glanced at Colonel Thurstan as she spoke. Every line of her face was eloquent of some hidden but tumultuous feeling. The words seemed to break from her almost in spite of herself. They fell upon the poor little conversation with an absolutely paralyzing effect.

For a moment no one spoke. The men applied themselves assiduously to their luncheon, and Mina Chester turned wondering eyes on Miss Lucas. It fell to Mrs. Ray to throw herself desperately into the breach.

"I have been showing Miss Chester over the house," she said, seizing upon the first idea that presented itself to her, and addressing herself rather incoherently to any one who would respond. "She was very anxious to see it all, were you not, Miss Chester?"

"It is a very fine old house," said Mina.

But the observation, though well-intentioned, was not exactly conversational, and Mrs. Ray continued with nervous alertness:

"By the bye, Miss Chester noticed something about my husband remarked upon yesterday. I wonder whether you've observed it, Miss Lucas? The portrait in the hall, the one over the fireplace, you know—have you happened to notice how very much you resemble it?"

With a sudden simultaneous movement, Miss Lucas and Colonel Thurstan turned to their hostess. Miss Lucas was flushing and paling strangely, and her words did not seem to come readily. It was Colonel Thurstan who said quietly:

"These slight resemblances often strike strangers."

The colour rushed over Miss Lucas's face, and she broke impulsively into speech.

"The resemblance is not slight," she said. "You are quite right, Mrs. Ray. I am exactly like your picture. May we not go into the drawing-room?"

It was in a considerably depressed frame of mind that Mrs. Ray betook herself about an hour later to the drawing-room. The three men had gone out with their guns directly after lunch, and their hostess felt that Miss Lucas and Miss Chester must no longer be left to one another for entertainment.

Miss Chester was not in the drawing-room, however, when Mrs. Ray, with a piece of needlework in her hand, opened the door. Miss Lucas was sitting alone by the fire, and the stormy thought on her face

cleared instantly as she received Mrs. Ray with a smile.

"Are we going to have a talk together?" she said. "That is very nice."

She was her brightest and most sympathetic self, and even before Mrs. Ray was fairly settled, the nervousness engendered in her by the uncertainty of temper evinced by her guest at lunch had disappeared. She did not speak at once; she was adapting her ideas to the pleasant sense of companionship and friendliness.

"Have you lived here long?"

The question was asked so pleasantly, that all thought of the position in which the speaker stood to her faded from Mrs. Ray's mind.

"We came here last spring," she said.

"We had lived in Manchester until then. Do you know Manchester?"

Miss Lucas shook her head.

"I've never been there," she said; "but you must have found this place a change in a great many ways. A pleasant change in some ways, but an unpleasant one in others, I dare say?"

The shadow cast by the spectre of Mrs. Ray's life dawned faintly forth upon her energetic little face. And the womanly eyes watching her noticed it.

"We were very glad to come," said Mrs. Ray slowly. "Manchester doesn't suit my husband at all. Country life agrees with him much better."

"And you prefer what suits him best, of course. I hope the country has made Mr. Ray really stronger."

There is nothing so magnetic as sympathy. There was nothing in the least demonstrative about the words; but Mrs. Ray responded to them almost unconsciously with a sense of confidence.

"It has," she said eagerly. "Oh, I couldn't tell you the difference it made to him. He had not been really well for years before we came here, and last winter he was so ill. And when he got better the doctor said he must live an out-of-doors life. I don't know what we should have done—because he was a solicitor, you see—if this place hadn't come to us just at the right moment."

"It was left to you?" said Miss Lucas.

"It came to my husband quite unexpectedly, as heir-at-law to a cousin."

"The cousin bought High Firs, I suppose," said Miss Lucas carelessly.

"Yes," returned Mrs. Ray, "it belonged to some people named Woodroffe, I believe."

Miss Lucas did not speak for a moment. Then she said brightly :

"A very nice inheritance, Mrs. Ray. Was it—had it been much neglected when you came to it?"

Mrs. Ray sighed.

"Yes," she said, "it isn't in at all a good state. That's one of our great difficulties."

"Can't you get it right?"

Mrs. Ray let her work fall on her knee, and sat looking straight before her into the fire. "We must," she said in a low tone, "if we don't, we can't stay here; and if we can't stay—"

She broke off short, not able to follow the sentence to its conclusion. Then she began again :

"You see, it's so difficult for us," she said, "because no money came to us; nothing at all except High Firs; and we had none of our own. We thought we could make the farm pay, and I knew my husband would have managed it beautifully if it had been in order when he took it. But it wasn't, and nothing seems to go right."

"And if it doesn't answer, will you have to go back to Manchester?"

Miss Lucas spoke softly, and a little sob broke from Mrs. Ray.

"We can't," she said; "it would kill him. We must make it answer somehow. Day and night I'm always thinking how."

She caught up her work again and began to sew desperately, and at the same moment the sound of the front door bell was heard. She paused, and looked at Miss Lucas, startled out of her rôle of hostess.

"Oh dear," she said, "that must be Miss Lloyd. She said she would call. I hope you won't mind."

Miss Lucas had only time to smile vaguely and reassuringly when the door opened and the caller appeared.

Miss Lloyd was the daughter of the vicar of the parish in which High Firs was situated. She was a woman of about two-and-thirty, sharp-faced, sallow and gaunt in person, and her mud-bespattered attire was more suitable for a ten-mile walk than for a call of any ceremony.

"How do you do, Mrs. Ray?" she said patronisingly. "Very unfortunate weather, isn't it? This is one of your guests, I suppose?"

"How do you do, Miss Lloyd?" returned Mrs. Ray. "Let me have the pleasure of introducing you to Miss Lucas."

Miss Lloyd evincing an intention of

shaking hands, Miss Lucas shook hands with her, and Miss Lloyd transferred her patronage from hostess to guest.

"Such a pity it should be so wet!" she said. "We country-born people don't mind it, of course; but Londoners are generally so ill provided against mud. You've not been out to-day, I dare say."

There was an immense superiority in the tone and question, and as Miss Lucas shook her head, a little quiver of amusement touched the corner of her lips.

"No," she said, "I have not."

"I'm afraid you'll find it of no use to wait for fine weather here," returned Miss Lloyd, with aggressive calmness, "and so possibly my errand may be useless. But I've come up to ask every one to come down to the school treat on the twenty-eighth. Mrs. Ray told me you wanted to see something of the Christmas life of the place."

"It's very kind of you, Miss Lloyd," said Mrs. Ray. Her voice trembled a little, and her whole frame was bristling with resentment at the visitor who had never before struck her as so aggressively patronising. "But I don't know—I don't feel sure that Miss Lucas will care—"

"Oh, of course, there's no necessity!" said Miss Lloyd tartly. "I shouldn't like any one to come to the treat who doesn't care about it. You should not—"

But Miss Lucas stopped her.

"Mrs. Ray has been most kind," she said, with a touch of hauteur that Mrs. Ray had never seen in her before. "Any arrangement she makes for our amusement will, I am sure, be delightful."

The relief with which Mrs. Ray hailed the approach of afternoon tea, with which Sarah at the moment appeared, was hardly to be measured. With tea appeared Mina Chester, hastily introduced by Mrs. Ray, and the ceremony was hardly concluded when Miss Lloyd rose to take leave.

"No tea, thank you," she said. "I must be getting back. Good-bye, Mrs. Ray. I shall expect you on the twenty-eighth, then."

She extended a set of cold finger-tips to Miss Lucas, who accepted them with a smile, shook hands patronisingly with Mina Chester, and withdrew.

"Disagreeable woman!" said Mrs. Ray vehemently, as the door closed. "I wish I'd never asked her to ask us! Only, you see, I thought it would be something to do—something Christmassy."

In the excitement of her indignation

Mrs. Ray was entirely oblivious of the fact that she was letting her guests further into the secrets of their entertainment than she would have done in a cooler moment. Miss Lucas caught sight of Mina Chester's face as the girl listened, and interposed quickly:

"It's a capital idea," she said brightly. "Just the thing we all want. A village school treat is the best fun in the world, and I dare say Miss Chester has never been to one. As to her being a disagreeable woman, what does that matter?"

But while she spoke the door had opened again, and the three men had come in, Stafford Ray in front, Colonel Thurstan and Ralph Ireland talking together as they followed him. Stafford Ray took up Miss Lucas's words.

"Who is a disagreeable woman, may I ask?" he said.

His wife answered him. "Miss Lloyd," she said. "You and Miss Lucas will agree, Stafford. She's been here to ask us to the school treat on the twenty-eighth."

"And are we all going?"

It was Colonel Thurstan who spoke. He had come up to the fire, and he spoke with indifferent composure. Miss Lucas started as he spoke. Her manner had altered on the entrance of the men, and she looked at Mrs. Ray now with an assumed carelessness, oddly contradicted by a slight vibration in her voice.

"You forgot to tell Miss Lloyd that you would have lost one of your guests by the twenty-eighth," she said. "Colonel Thurstan goes on the twenty-seventh, I believe."

Before Mrs. Ray could answer, Colonel Thurstan spoke.

"No," he said. "I propose to myself the pleasure of staying another week if Mrs. Ray will be kind enough to keep me."

With a movement so abrupt as to be almost violent, Miss Lucas rose.

"Miss Chester," she said incoherently, "I promised to show you my needlework. Would you like to see it now?"

CHAPTER V. AN OLD-FASHIONED CHRISTMAS.

THE elements were against Mrs. Ray. The wet weather that had received her guests declared itself as a settled condition of affairs. Day after day she awoke to see the same rain-blurred landscape. Day after day the rain fell in a cold, persistent downpour from morning till night.

With a sanguineness that was almost pathetic, Mrs. Ray fortified herself with a conviction, how or why formed nobody

could have said, that it was absolutely impossible such weather could continue over Christmas. Even a mild and dripping Christmas Eve was powerless to shake her faith, and she superintended the decoration of the house with distressingly sodden evergreens, and piled up Christmas logs in the great hearths without a doubt in her mind but that the next morning would dawn bright and frosty. But even Christmas Day betrayed her. It was as wet as any of its predecessors, and it was raw and cold to boot. Perhaps the hostess's disappointment affected the spirits of the party; or perhaps they were all influenced by the incongruity between the festal spirit of the day and the dreary front it presented. For a cloud of depression, unequalled even in the annals of the past depressing week, settled down upon the house. Nobody went to church; and after a lunch during which conversation languished pitifully, the party separated as if by common consent.

Miss Lucas went to the drawing-room; Mina Chester repaired to her room; Ralph Ireland went round to the farm with Stafford Ray; Colonel Thurstan shut himself up in the library; and Mrs. Ray retired, heavy-hearted, to inspect the plum-pudding. At three o'clock in the afternoon not a sound was to be heard in the house but the beating of the rain against the windows and the moaning of the wind.

The silence was broken from without; the garden door opened and Stafford Ray came in. Kicking off his wet boots, and taking off his rain-soaked overcoat, he came into the hall and proceeded to warm himself before the fire; and while he was thus occupied the library door opened and Colonel Thurstan came out. He was looking grave, but he paused, as he saw his host, to speak a word or two about the weather. A mutual liking had sprung up between the two men, and Stafford Ray responded cordially. Then he paused, not looking at his guest as he moved one of the logs with his foot.

"I am more sorry than I can say that things should have fallen out like this," he said.

"Thanks," said Colonel Thurstan. "It's nothing more than one must calculate upon in this climate. I'm afraid it's more distressing to Mrs. Ray than to anybody else."

"She regrets it very much, of course," said Stafford. He paused again, and then said: "If, under the circumstances, you'd like to get away, Thurstan, don't let anything stand in your way. We shall quite understand—both my wife and I."

Deliberately matter-of-fact as was the form in which the words were spoken, there was a delicate something behind that the other man seemed to understand. Colonel Thurstan did not speak for a moment, and then he said slowly: "Thanks; but I have no desire whatever to get away."

He went on across the hall and up the stairs, leaving his host staring into the fire. But he was not left to meditation long. A step sounded along the passage leading from the kitchen premises, and Mrs. Ray appeared. A wonderfully low-spirited expression of satisfaction broke from her as she became aware of her husband's presence, and she came up to the fireplace. She did not speak, but stood gazing absently and ruefully before her.

"Well, little woman," her husband said cheerfully, "what have you been doing?"

"I don't know," she answered. "Oh, Stafford, isn't it dreadful?"

"Well, it isn't just what we should have chosen," he said, "but it may clear up, you know."

"I don't believe it would do any good," she answered desperately. "Now that Christmas Day is such a dreadful failure, I don't think anything will make things better!"

Her husband patted her gently on the shoulder.

"Christmas Day is very often a failure," he said. "People expect too much of it. Besides, it isn't over yet. I dare say we shall cheer up at dinner."

Mrs. Ray lifted eyes eloquent of despair.

"How can we cheer up?" she said, "with Miss Lucas and Colonel Thurstan as they are! Stafford, it's dreadful! She is so nice and sweet to everybody else, and I'm on thorns whenever they are together. It's dreadful when she ignores him, but it's much worse when she flares up."

"And she 'flares up' with increasing frequency," observed Stafford Ray.

"Why doesn't he go?" broke out Colonel Thurstan's hostess piteously. "What can have made him stay on? We should have got on so beautifully without him, I'm sure we should."

"He has his reasons, I suppose," said Stafford Ray. "You can't suppose he stays—to be treated as Miss Lucas treats him—solely for the pleasure of it!" He stopped, and then, as though with the object of diverting his wife's thoughts into cheerier lines, he said: "Your other pair are all right, however. There's no trouble connected with them."

Mrs. Ray paused doubtfully.

"They get on nicely together," she said. "And, yes, I suppose they are both very pleasant. Mr. Ireland certainly is."

But while Mr. and Mrs. Ray were thus placidly commending them, one member of the "other pair" was being disturbed by ideas likely to lead to results calculated to extinguish her hostess's last gleam of comfort. Mina Chester and Ralph Ireland had now been for nearly a week under the same roof. It had happened, naturally enough, that the two youngest members of the party had been thrown a good deal together, and so far the girl had accepted this position of affairs with simple unconcern.

Of all the workings that were going on inside Mina Chester's grave little head on this Christmas Day it would be impossible to give any idea. There was an undercurrent amongst them of which she herself was absolutely unconscious. But they had brought her to a frame of mind that seemed to herself, and would have seemed to any other person to whom the surface aspect of affairs alone was presented, natural, and even praiseworthy. She asked herself no questions; she deliberately entrenched herself in a position of superior reprobation. Mina disapproved of flirtation. She had always held in grave contempt the light-mindedness of young men who could not talk to a girl without spicing their intercourse with such seasoning. But she decided gradually that she had more of Mr. Ireland's society than was necessary. It was ridiculous, for instance, she told herself, that she could never even go for a walk when it cleared up for a little, without finding him hanging about in the hall ready to ask to be allowed to accompany her. She had become aware after lunch to-day that he was watching covertly but intently, for any word as to her intentions for the afternoon. And in accordance with her new sense of the position Mina had instinctively frustrated his plans. Instead of waiting for a possible clearance, she took advantage of his departure with Stafford Ray to slip out early in the afternoon, fortified against the weather by thick boots, short skirt, macintosh, and umbrella.

As she made her way along the muddy lanes, her enjoyment of the process was of a severe and deliberate order. It was her first lonely walk for a week, and she assured herself continually that she was greatly enjoying her solitude. It was presumably vexation that brought the colour into her face with a swift rush as she became aware

of a familiar masculine figure coming with long strides to meet her.

"I saw you turn into the lane," began Ralph Ireland cheerfully as he reached her, "and I thought as I was going for a walk, too, perhaps you wouldn't mind if we joined forces."

His manner to her had altered during the last week, slightly and very subtly. It was quite as simple, but it had acquired something which, all insensible as she was of the fact, had stirred in the girl the impulses above described.

Mina received him coldly.

"I don't know," she said. "It's too wet for a walk."

Ralph Ireland glanced at her in some surprise.

"It's better than it was when you set out," he said. "But perhaps you didn't realise how bad it was."

A certain expression of lofty disapprobation developed upon Mina's face.

"I wasn't thinking of my own walk," she said. "I never intended to go far. I thought you meant a man's walk."

"What! A fifteen miler!" said Ralph Ireland. He was cheerful still, but a little doubtful. A touch of disapproval in her tone made itself apparent to him. "Well, it is rather wet for that, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't have thought that the weather mattered to a man," said Miss Chester loftily. "I should have thought you would have been glad of something of the kind, after all the dawdling of this week."

Ralph Ireland laughed. Her words were not reasonable, and he was aware of the fact; but he laughed rather deprecatingly, nevertheless.

"Oh, well!" he said, "one comes into the country to dawdle, don't you think? And I have tramped about, too. Why, we've tramped about together, you know. It was seven miles the day before yesterday, there and back, to Escott."

The words, instead of softening his hearer, seemed to harden her heart.

"You speak as if 'tramping about,' as you call it, were really an occupation, Mr. Ireland," she said. "Do you never intend to do anything else?"

"Rather!" he returned lightly; "some of these days!"

"Then I should have thought it was time you began," said the girl sternly. "You've been doing nothing for two years, on your own showing, but amuse yourself."

"I've been taking a holiday," he pleaded.

Mina Chester turned upon him instantly, with cutting scorn.

"I don't understand a two years' holiday," she said, "and I really can't make out what you have ever done to deserve a holiday at all."

Ralph Ireland made no reply. His cheery face had grown dejected, and he seemed to submit himself to his critic with a meekness out of proportion to the independence of his usual demeanour.

"You are rather down on me, Miss Chester," he said at last, in a low voice. "Have I done anything to annoy you?"

It would have seemed impossible that Mina's figure should become more erect than it already was, had it not been for the fact that she undoubtedly drew it up.

"Certainly not," she said.

"You didn't mind my coming, did you? We've had such a lot of jolly walks together that I thought, well—I thought we might as well have another."

Mina Chester was a veracious young woman; but her next words were not characterised by absolute truth.

"I did not think about it," she said. "It's not of sufficient importance to make any difference to me."

They turned into a narrow lane that led back to High Firs, and they plodded along it, in the early twilight of the rainy afternoon, in absolute silence.

The party had not been in the drawing-room that evening, awaiting the announcement of dinner, for five minutes, before Stafford Ray observed that the one cheerful note in the ill-harmonised chord had lost its tune. Ralph Ireland hardly spoke. Glancing from the young man to Mina Chester, her host observed that she, too, was silent and rather pale. If she had contributed little, hitherto, to the actual merriment of the party, she had been invariably pleasant and responsive. To-night, however, she seemed to be withdrawn from her surroundings and to have entrenched herself in a stiff, unapproachable reserve.

The Christmas dinner that followed seemed to Mrs. Ray to add the last straw to the burden of her distress. The long pauses of silence were frightful; but even more terrible were the spasmodic attempts at a forced hilarity. And after dinner, when all the Christmas forms had been gone through with and the party was re-assembled in the drawing-room, even the pretence of festivity was abandoned, and a quiet of the most depressing nature prevailed. About twenty minutes elapsed, and

then this quiet passed the limits of Mrs. Ray's endurance. Springing up from her chair she faced her company, a red patch of distress on either cheek, her eyes bright with the effort she was making.

"Come, good people," she said with a forced cheerfulness that sounded exaggerated, even to herself, "Christmas Day isn't over yet, and a merry ending is still before us. We've been having an old-fashioned, homely day, let's wind up with an old-fashioned amusement! What do you all say! Suppose we tell one another stories!"

As though the preceding stillness had involved some kind of strain to every member of the party, a little stir went round it on Mrs. Ray's movement; but nobody spoke until Stafford Ray came to his wife's assistance.

"Old fashions are not so easily revived," he said, "and sometimes, when they are revived, they don't turn out very well. I'm afraid we're none of us prepared to turn ourselves into an old-fashioned Christmas Number on the spur of the moment."

"Why not?" demanded Mrs. Ray energetically and with a forced little laugh. "It was a regular Christmas institution once upon a time, and I don't see why it shouldn't be great fun. Mr. Ireland, what do you think?"

Ralph Ireland held a magazine on his knee, though he had not attempted to turn a page for the last half-hour. He shook his head dubiously.

"I dare say it would be very jolly, Mrs. Ray," he said. "But I'm no good at story-telling myself. And, perhaps, as Ray suggests, that kind of thing has been a trifle played out."

Mrs. Ray tapped one hand against the other as though her impatience was indeed becoming desperate.

"Nonsense!" she cried briskly. "It's old enough to be revived, and anybody can tell a story if they choose." She glanced despairingly down the room, and with a sudden instinctive hope that she could not have explained, "Miss Lucas, what do you say?" she cried.

As though her nerves were strained almost beyond her power of self-control, Miss Lucas rose impulsively and came up to where her hostess stood. Miss Lucas was looking extremely handsome this evening. She was dressed in a black velvet gown, cut square and plentifully relieved with old lace, and the dress became her admirably. But it was the intense life which seemed

to fill her, the rapid play of expression, passionate out of all proportion to the petty incidents of the moment, that made her appearance so striking. Throughout the day her self-command seemed to have been exercised to the uttermost to keep in check something that flashed out now and again irrepressibly, whenever circumstances brought her into contact with Colonel Thurstan. Throughout the day the barrier of bare politeness which stood between them seemed to have been wearing thinner as she alternately ignored him, or flashed upon him some passionate sarcasm. She did not look at him now; but her whole face seemed to be alight with a fire which her eyes held for him alone as she said quickly and with an unusual ring in her voice: "It's a capital idea, Mrs. Ray! I'm sure we shall all enjoy it. I'll set the example, if you like, and begin."

CHAPTER VI. MISS LUCAS'S STORY.

EVEN though that dejected little company Miss Lucas's words carried a thrill. Mina Chester came nearer to the fire, with a pleased expectancy in her face. Ralph Ireland shut his magazine and tossed it on the table as he said, more cheerily than he had spoken that evening:

"Miss Lucas is a public benefactor, and I propose a vote of thanks."

Mrs. Ray could have fallen upon the neck of the public benefactor with tears of joy, but she restricted herself to conventional thanks of surpassing heartiness; thanks echoed more quietly by her husband, into whose observant eyes had shot a gleam of curiosity. Even Colonel Thurstan seemed not untouched by the stir. He moved suddenly, and looked steadily at Miss Lucas. Then he looked away again without speaking. He rested his elbow on a table near him, propping his chin on his hand; and there was something stiff and constrained about his attitude.

"Where will you sit, Miss Lucas?" said Stafford Ray, gaily. "By all the laws of precedent, the story-teller should sit in the middle."

"In the middle, by all means," responded Miss Lucas rather recklessly. "Are you coming to sit next me, Mina? That's right."

By this arrangement Mina Chester came between Miss Lucas and Colonel Thurstan, and by a sharp and apparently accidental little movement Miss Lucas so turned her chair, that while the girl was close to her

side the silent figure by the table was behind her.

"I only know one story," went on Miss Lucas in the same vibrating tones, "so I can offer you no choice; and even if you find it dull, I bargain that you hear me out."

"We are not in the least likely to find it dull," said Mrs. Ray, the first touch of content that she had known that day descending on her harassed soul. "Is it a Christmas story?"

Miss Lucas drew a long breath—rather a tremulous breath it seemed to Mina Chester. She took the girl's hand as it lay on the arm of her chair, and began to play absently with the long sensitive fingers. Now that she stood on the brink of the undertaking to which she had pledged herself she seemed to be looking—not doubtfully, but as one who faces the difficulty of arrangement—into the recesses of her memory.

"No," she said at last, "it's not a Christmas story; it's a summer story, I think—the story of a long vacation."

Colonel Thurstan lifted his head, and leaned forward as if to speak. His eyes rested on Miss Lucas's profile, and he fell back into his former attitude slowly and deliberately. She had ignored his movement. To all outward appearance she might have been unconscious of it. But her voice had gained a suggestion of defiant determination as she began her story.

"It was in an English country house," she said, "that the people of whom I am going to tell you lived. If you want to picture their surroundings, you may think of this house. One country house is very like another. And it will save us the trouble of description."

She had spoken hurriedly, but she controlled her voice with an effort, and went on:

"It was a home that any girls and boys might have been happy to grow up in; and a girl who grew to womanhood there twenty years ago, though the chances of life drifted her away from it, loves it now no less than she loved it then. The girl's name"—she hesitated almost imperceptibly, and then continued fluently: "the girl's name was Lucy. Perhaps it was because she had no mother to be the centre of her home thoughts and her home life that Lucy loved the place itself so dearly. Perhaps it was by reason of the same blank in her life that all her childish hopes and joys, all the happiness of a childhood as bright as any child ever had, were bound up with the

two little companions with whom her early days were passed—her only brother and her cousin. The girl was the youngest of the trio; her cousin, whose name was—" again Miss Lucas paused and hesitated—"was James, was the eldest. There were four years between them, and two years between Lucy and Geoffrey, her brother. But in the days when they were all children together the difference was of little account. Geoffrey was a quiet child, reserved and silent, apt to seem a little slow at times; and Lucy was his protector, his tyrant, and his most devoted slave. She fought his battles; she pushed and pulled him through all the difficulties of their childish games and adventures.

"It was, I suppose, something self-willed in her character, that made the footing on which she stood to her cousin different from that usual between a boy, and a girl four years his junior. They met on an equality; there was a ground of strength of will, common to them, on which Geoffrey had no footing; and on this ground they quarrelled, on this ground they made it up again, on this ground the girl developed an admiration for the boyish superiority that she alternately resented and denied. Childhood has no beginning for a child. An eternity of hourly intercourse seemed to lie behind them when the first break came, in the shape of school life for the boys. Years came and went, each bringing with it Christmas, Easter, and Midsummer. Holidays followed holidays, and such changes as they brought came about so imperceptibly that nothing marked the flow of time which made the schoolboys into men, the girl into a woman.

"The sequence of term time and holiday came to an end at last. James passed from Sandhurst into a line regiment; Geoffrey went to Oxford. For a year their appearances at home were irregular, and as they seldom happened to come together, the old life in all its completeness was broken. Then circumstances so fell out that it was renewed with a sense of permanency that the holidays of school life had never known. Geoffrey announced his intention of spending the whole of a long vacation at home; and about a month before the end of that May term, James met with an accident, and came home also on long sick leave. He was not ill after the first week, and by the time Geoffrey arrived he was himself to all intents and purposes, but declared in need of at least three months' rest."

Miss Lucas paused. She had spoken with an ease that seemed to be the outcome

of strange excitement. She was looking straight before her now; her eyes dark and glowing. Her audience had listened intently, their interest held by something indefinite about the speaker. There was a moment's silence, and then Mrs. Ray said:

"Will you tell us what they were like?"

A smile passed across Miss Lucas's lips. She did not turn her eyes towards the speaker, but they grew a little dreamy, as she said:

"Like? In some respects they were the children of ten years before, grown very little older, at the beginning of that long vacation. Geoffrey was fair, with an oval face and a pale complexion. He had dreamy blue eyes and slow, absent-minded ways. He had not done much at college, he was not the kind of man who makes much show; but he was interested in a slow, erratic fashion in innumerable out-of-the-way questions; and I think there were the makings of a poet beneath his sleepy exterior." Miss Lucas's voice had grown tremulous, and she went on hurriedly and with a certain defiance in her voice. "Lucy had grown from a self-willed child into a headstrong girl. She was of a tempestuous nature, and years of practical independence had given her a tendency to arrange all things that came in contact with her after a somewhat high-handed fashion. Where she loved, she loved wholesale; where she trusted, she trusted wholesale; and in those days she did not hate."

She stopped again, and then resumed, dropping into her former even tone.

"The freedom of their childish days had been as nothing to the freedom of what they would have called their maturity. There was no one in the house to whom their word was not law, except its master."

"Geoffrey and Lucy's father came of a family which had owned the old place, from father to son, through centuries. He had inherited some of the best qualities of his race; honour, integrity, and courtesy; and he had developed others on his own account. He had scholarly tastes of a dilettante nature; but his studies had not led him in the direction of human nature; and he had a contempt for youth that was almost obtuse. He lived his life in the same house with his children, meeting them at meal times and occasionally in the evening, furthering their wishes kindly enough, but finding all his interest in the engravings, of which he was a collector, and in visits to London and to the Continent, where he foregathered with

men of like tastes with himself. The young people, thus ignored, ignored their elder. He never interfered with them, and gradually there grew amongst them a notion that their affairs were no concern of his, and that they were to go their own way for ever. I think now that the neglect which brought this state of things about was not intentional. I think that in what happened afterwards, the father, who did not suffer least, was to be pitied, and pitied only. I think he was merely waiting until his son should have grown out of a stage with which he had no sympathy, and that he looked forward to the time when the boy, in whom he took no interest, should become the man who would be congenial to him. He welcomed his son, on the first evening of that long vacation, asked him a few careless questions, sat some time in the drawing-room after dinner, and then went to his library, leaving the three young people alone together.

"I think they were all three anxious," Miss Lucas went on, "that the holiday time before them should be a repetition of the holiday times of old. To Geoffrey, indeed, no thought of any possible change had come." Miss Lucas's voice had grown lower, and she was stroking Mina Chester's hand gently. "Neither of the other two, I believe, wished to press into definite shape the difference that was gradually creeping over their intercourse. One of them—Lucy—was in that thorny stage of dawning womanhood which is half inclined to deny, half inclined to turn and rend, the conviction which is slowly developing her whole nature."

"Nothing had passed between James and Lucy during the three weeks of his convalescence, which might not have passed between them during any three weeks of their long familiarity. If they had quarrelled less often, the captious uncertainty of the girl's temper had rendered their quarrels bitterer when they did occur. Nevertheless, there was a difference. Something was creeping between them which all the pride of her girlish nature was set to keep at bay."

"It was under a restless distaste for an unusual silence which fell upon the drawing-room that first evening, that she announced to her brother a piece of news that she knew would hardly please him."

"'Geoffrey,' she said, 'you don't know Netta Strangeways, do you?'"

"Geoffrey was lying on the sofa, his hands clasped behind his head."

"'I never, to my knowledge, heard of her,' he said lazily."

"'You must have heard of her,' returned his sister, 'because she's a great friend of mine. She's coming here on Thursday, for a long visit.'

"Geoffrey turned his head and looked at her reproachfully.

"'What a bore!' he said. It was characteristic of him to take no further trouble to express his sense that a stranger would spoil the harmony of their little party; and Lucy, who had invited her guest before she knew of the reunion the long vacation was to bring about, proceeded to deal peremptorily with her brother's unspoken objections.

"'Oh, no, it isn't!' she said. 'She's the dearest little thing in the world, and she'll enjoy herself immensely. James knows her, don't you, James? She was here from Saturday till Monday, when he had his last leave. Poor dear, she's a governess, and has to look after three riotous children when she's more fit to be looked after herself. She's been ill from overwork, and I want her to have a thorough rest. You'll go with me to meet her on Thursday, Geoffrey, won't you?'

"It so happened, however, that Lucy did not go to meet her friend after all. On the morning succeeding her brother's return, she was thrown, to her infinite disgust, from her horse, and though she was not hurt, she was just shaken enough to submit to the medical fiat which enjoined quiet for a week. The idea that Netta Strangeways should arrive unmet troubled her greatly, and she caught eagerly at a suggestion that James should represent her at the station.

"Lucy was a prisoner in her own sitting-room upstairs—such a dear old room, with long windows looking out over the country, and low window-seats. She was lying on the sofa, and Geoffrey, who had spent the afternoon reading to her and listening to her desultory talk, was sitting in one of the window recesses when James's hand opened the door, and his voice announced: 'I have brought Miss Strangeways, Lucy. Here she is.' And Netta Strangeways came in."

Miss Lucas stopped. She seemed to be reflecting, and strange tender smiles touched her lips and eyes and disappeared again.

"You will want to know what Netta was like," she said. She turned for the first time and looked at Mina Chester as the girl sat by her side. She put her fingers under the pretty chin, and turned up the girlish face, looking at it intently. "I think I can't do better than tell you at once

that I have never seen any one who reminds me of her as Miss Chester does. She had the same hair, the same eyes, above all, the same chin, only the expression was different. Netta was shy and shrinking to the last degree. She was a girl who should always have had some one to protect her. Even when she was quite at ease and full of gentle confidence in the people about her, there was something appealing in her glance, something that was always ready to develop into self-distrust."

Miss Lucas released the girlish chin, and touching Mina's cheek gently, she said, as though half forgetting her audience:

"Be thankful for your self-possession, dear."

Then she resumed her narrative hurriedly and with a little constraint:

"Netta stood hesitating just within the doorway, and Lucy sprang up from her sofa and welcomed her eagerly. Lucy had not many friends; she lavished all her love upon a few. She turned at last with her arm thrown protectingly round Netta's slighter figure and looked for her brother.

"'Geoffrey,' she said, 'come and be introduced to Miss Strangeways.'

"Geoffrey was standing with his back to the window, and the sunset light was streaming over his head upon Netta as she turned shyly towards him. He came towards them slowly, and Lucy thought his eyes looked odd.

"'This is my brother, Netta,' she said. 'Geoffrey, this is my Netta.'

"And then the two shook hands in silence.

"What happy days they were that followed! What perfect girl and boy happiness they held! All day long the four were together, sharing a common stock of pleasures, interests, jokes. Sometimes they spent long afternoons in walks or rides. Sometimes they loitered the time away on the lawn, sometimes in Lucy's sitting-room. Netta's shyness melted as a shadow before the sun. A niche in the little party seemed to have been waiting for her all these years, and she fitted into it instantly. Only with Lucy's father she never became familiarised. In his presence she was always frightened and unready.

"Perhaps the happy intercourse of those days, with their simple, youthful pleasure in life, did more to bring Lucy into harmony with her womanly self than anything else could have done. It gave her time; it loosened the strange strain of feeling that had chafed her, in spite of herself, into

rebellion; it allowed all that was best in her to mature gradually. Perhaps the atmosphere about her influenced her too. Perhaps the sight and sense of the idyll—tacitly ignored as far as speech went, among the quartette—which was growing out of the happy unfettered summer life, did not pass her by untouched. She asked herself no questions, she did not analyse her growing womanliness, only I think her life went a little deeper every day and her quarrels with her cousin ceased.

"It was an afternoon towards the middle of August. The weeks had disappeared unnoticed in the passing, as only weeks so spent can disappear. Lucy had promised Netta a sketch of the garden, to be made from one of the drawing-room windows, and the day being very hot, she had established herself in the cool of the shady room to keep her promise. Geoffrey and Netta had been with her for some time, and at last they went away into the garden to find shade there. Lucy had worked contentedly in solitude for more than an hour, when the door opened and James came in. She knew his footstep, but she did not lift her head, and he came up to her quietly and looked over her shoulder.

"That's very good," he said. He was not a man of many words, although his silence had nothing in common with Geoffrey's. There was something reliable about it, and everything he said carried weight. Simple as they were his words carried weight now. He did not often praise her paintings. He used to say that they presented their subject in too original a light for him. Lucy did not look up, but she felt the colour rush into her cheeks as she said:

"I'm glad you think so."

"He did not move from his position at the back of her chair, and Lucy felt that her hand was not quite steady. She laid down her brush and began to mix some colour.

"I wish you would do a sketch for me," he said. "Will you, Lucy?"

"A sketch of what?" she said, working away industriously at her colour.

"A sketch of the house," he answered. He moved as he spoke to the window by which she was working. "A sketch from the beech over there. It's my favourite view."

"You shall have it," she said.

"Thank you," he answered. He said no more and the words were followed by a

silence. Lucy's hand had grown steady again. She took up her brush and worked on absently. A sudden strange peace seemed to have risen in her; she was absolutely at rest, absolutely secure, and the silence might have lasted on for ever to her unalloyed content.

"It was broken by a movement on James's part. He had been leaning against the window-frame looking out into the garden. He lifted himself, and his unseeing gaze seemed to become interested. Then he said in a low voice:

"Lucy, look here."

"She rose and came towards him, following the direction of his hand, as he made a slight gesture.

"Ah," she said softly, "James!"

"A long walk ran down one side of the garden, screened here and there by trees and shrubs. Towards this walk James had pointed, and down it, walking very slowly, their faces turned each to the other, were Geoffrey and Netta. There was that in every look, as they sauntered on absorbed in one another, which no onlooker could mistake. They were treading on enchanted ground, oblivious of all the world beside.

"There was a happy sound in Lucy's cry, but James made no response. He hesitated a moment, and then said gravely:

"Lucy, I don't like it."

"The words fell on the girl as a shock of cold water might have done. The idea materialised in that glimpse of Geoffrey and Netta was one that had been familiar to her for days. She had known that it must be familiar to James also, and though no word had passed between them on the subject, she had assumed that his sympathies went with hers. Startled and indignant, with all that was most inflammable about her ready to fire up, she faced him.

"What do you mean?" she said. "It's charming! It's like a fairy tale. I never saw two people so much in love."

"There's a factor in most fairy tales," he said, "that we have all ignored. What do you think your father will say, Lucy?"

"My father!" she said. "Why of course he will say nothing! Why should he? It's for Geoffrey to choose his own wife, and he couldn't have chosen a sweeter one! I suppose you feel that, at any rate!"

"James hesitated. Lucy's colour rose.

"To some extent," he said; "she is very sweet, as you say; very gentle and good. But to be honest with you, Lucy, I doubt whether she is quite the wife for Geoffrey."

And I doubt still more whether your father will think her so.'

"If you can doubt upon the first point," cried Lucy scornfully, 'you are welcome to doubt on the other. I don't know which is the more preposterous! Don't bring your doubts to me, at least! Take them to my father if you think they'll interest him.'

"She was facing him with her eyes flashing, all the gentleness of a few minutes ago swept from her. Suddenly she turned her head, listening eagerly.

"Go!" she cried peremptorily. 'Go away at once! Netta's coming. I hear her. She's coming to tell me. Go away! Go away!'

"As though her insistence swept him before it, he turned and crossed the room. As he opened the door, Netta, hardly seeing him in her agitation, came in. He closed it quietly, and she threw herself into Lucy's arms."

Miss Lucas paused abruptly. She had spoken apparently with an intense realisation of the scene she described, and she seemed to come suddenly back to a sense of the actual condition of affairs. She glanced with an odd, half-startled defiance at Colonel Thurstan. He had sat, without the slightest change in his position, ever since she began her story, and he did not stir now. Then she glanced at the faces of her other auditors. They were all interested; on Mina Chester's face particularly, there was a singularly intent look.

"What a good audience!" said Miss Lucas. She spoke with a slightly excited laugh. "I'm rather long, I'm afraid. I hope it doesn't bore you?"

She looked at her hostess as she spoke, and Mrs. Ray answered promptly, and in a tone that fully testified to the truth of her words:

"I never heard a story that interested me more; please go on."

Miss Lucas laughed again rather recklessly, and resumed.

"I don't think I need tell you what Netta and Lucy said to one another," she said. "The women will imagine it for themselves, and for the men it doesn't matter. Netta had come to tell her friend that Geoffrey had asked her to be his wife. Her gentle nature was overflowing with its innocent happiness, and Geoffrey's sister met her confidences with the tenderness of unalloyed delight. In her boundless satisfaction, even the keen indignation that James's words had stirred in Lucy subsided.

She could afford to treat them as the doubts of an over-cautious nature. And when they met again at dinner there was only a certain triumphant defiance in her manner towards him.

"She did not see her brother, though she made a hasty rush through the house in search of him, until just as the dinner gong sounded; and she had only time for a hasty squeeze of his hand and a look of infinite congratulation. The evening seemed very long to her, for her father, contrary to his habit, did not go to his library until, her patience exhausted, Lucy carried off Netta to bed. She expected that the two youngmen would come upstairs immediately, and she meant to waylay Geoffrey and draw him into her sitting-room to listen to all that she was longing to say. She did not try to detain Netta, who slipped away to her room, shy and happy; but waited alone, with her sitting-room door half open. Half an hour passed, however, before she heard the steps for which she was listening. They came up the stairs slowly, and no words passed between the two young men. Lucy darted to the door.

"Come in," she said, clasping both hands round Geoffrey's arm and drawing him into the room. 'Come in, my dear old boy, and let me tell you how delighted I am! You two were made for one another! And that's paying you a great compliment, sir; it's saying that the best girl in the world was made for you. Oh, Geoffrey, dearest, I am so pleased!'

"James had hesitated for a moment outside the door; then, apparently considering himself included in her invitation to enter, he had come in, and was standing by the door. But Lucy took no notice of his presence.

"For a moment Geoffrey made no response. Then he said heavily:

"Thank you, Lucy. I'm glad you like it."

"Something in his tone struck his sister. She drew a little back and looked into his face. It was very white, there was an odd, determined set about his mouth, and his eyes had a gleam that she had never seen in them.

"What is it, Geoffrey?" she said. 'What is it?'

"He released himself from her hold and turned away.

"Nothing," he said slowly.

"But there is something," she returned, impetuously. 'I know there is! Geoffrey, tell me!'

"There's nothing to tell you," he said. His voice was low, and there was something dogged in it. "Nothing that will make any difference to any one."

"James moved. He came further into the room and looked at Geoffrey; his face, too, was troubled.

"Geoffrey," he said. "Don't take it like that. It's no good. You'd better tell Lucy what has happened."

"If you think it's likely to interest her, I'll tell her by all means," said Geoffrey. "But since it makes not a particle of difference to any one, it doesn't seem to me worth talking about. My father doesn't approve of my engagement, that's all. He seems to have thought that I should wait for him to find me a wife. His mistake, that's all!"

"He turned as he spoke and walked out of the room.

"Thus left, Lucy turned to James; her face demanding the explanation for which her voice refused to ask.

"Lucy," he said, "it's very serious. I warned you to-day that your father might not like what pleases you so much, but I never realised that he would absolutely forbid it."

"Forbid it!" she cried incredulously. "Forbid Geoffrey to marry Netta!" She paused and changed her tone suddenly. "Did Geoffrey tell father?" she said. "How did he hear of it?"

"He saw them in the long walk this afternoon," returned James, meeting her eyes steadily. "He stopped Geoffrey just now and asked him what it meant. Geoffrey told him that Miss Strangeways was to be his wife."

"And what did he say?" demanded Lucy breathlessly.

"He spoke very quietly," said James. "I think he meant to speak kindly. But he said that such a marriage was quite out of the question."

"Why? Not because Netta is poor?"

"Not for that reason only. My uncle is too generous for that. But he said—you'd better know it all, Lucy—that neither her birth, her position, nor her qualities fitted her to become Geoffrey's wife. He did not argue. He simply said that Geoffrey must give up the idea. And what he said he meant."

"A long breath parted Lucy's lips, and then she spoke.

"Give it up!" she said. "Give it up when he's spoken to her, and she has said yes! My father must be mad! Geoffrey told him he never would, of course."

"James looked at her for a moment, and then he spoke, sternly and decidedly.

"Lucy," he said, "try to understand. If you allow yourself to be carried away by your own hopes and wishes you'll help to wreck Geoffrey for life. I wish to Heaven that this had never come about. It can come to nothing. Your father looks upon it as a mere boy and girl flirtation, and as such he will put his foot down on it remorselessly. We have had our own way so long that we have forgotten that he has some right to be consulted on a matter such as this. Geoffrey is his only son, and he will have to obey."

"She had heard him out, but that was all. The last word had hardly passed his lips when her indignation broke its bounds.

"Obey!" she said. "Obey what is unreasonable, unjust, and unmanly! Obey an order that would break not only his own heart but Netta's too! Why, if I thought he could do such a thing I should be ashamed to call him my brother! And you expect me not only to countenance it, but to help in it! You expect me to persuade him that love means nothing, and is of no account, and that he is to put it away—as a child puts away a toy he's forbidden to play with! You don't know much of me, after all these years, if you think I'll ever do that!"

"I suppose there was something in her tone that stung him. He answered her hotly:

"I have known very little of you," he said, "if you are as utterly unreasonable as you seem now. What I am trying to make you understand is this: that defiance is useless, and that the sooner its uselessness is realised the shorter the agony will be."

"Thank you," she said. All her love and loyalty towards her brother! all her love and loyalty towards her friend! were in arms. Perhaps all that was most headstrong in her temperament was arrayed against him also. Her voice was ringing with passion. "You haven't said a word to me upon the subject which, if I had been a man, I shouldn't have been ashamed to utter; to which, being a woman, I don't scorn to listen! Don't waste any more words in trying to make me reasonable. I'm proud to know it is useless."

"He looked at her for a moment, and his lips were pale.

"There's no more to be said, then," he returned.

"He was turning away; his hand was on the door when she stopped him.

"There is one thing more to be said," she said peremptorily. "I won't have Netta hear anything of this. Not anything at all. Do you understand?"

"He hesitated a moment, and then answered coldly:

"Very well."

"You will not speak to her; you will give her no hint. Do you promise?"

"If you wish," he said in the same tone, and left the room.

"The day that followed broke for Lucy weighted with an undefinable load of oppression, and nothing she could say or do could bring about the easy quiet of the days that had preceded it. Geoffrey, though he dawdled through the hours exactly as he had done for weeks past, was absent-minded and uncertain. He had agreed with Lucy, gloomily, as to the desirability of keeping Netta in ignorance of the cloud that hung about them; but he made no effort to be much alone with her. James was stern and silent. As though the break-up of the relations of the past weeks was the precursor of actual change, he received by the morning's post a recall from his Colonel, which would oblige him to rejoin his regiment in two days' time; and he was necessarily occupied over his preparations for so unexpected a departure.

"Lucy herself was restless; tumultuous passions of every kind held possession of her and flamed undisturbed. Netta's gentle presence, and the necessity for self-control that it involved, was a constraint to her; and as the day wore on, the very timidity of her companion's manner began to jar on her strained nerves. It was a relief when she was left, late in the afternoon, alone in the drawing-room. She had hardly realised the satisfaction of solitude when Geoffrey came into the room and came slowly up to her.

"Lucy," he said, "will you take care of her for me? I'm ordered off."

"Lucy stretched out her hand quickly and caught his in a grasp of passionate sympathy.

"Father?" she said.

"He nodded.

"He sent me a note just now. Doesn't want to see me till I've had time to reflect. Wishes me to go away for a week, and come back in a sensible frame of mind."

"You can't give her up, Geoffrey!" cried his sister.

"Geoffrey's set lips relaxed into a smile.

"I'll give her up when I give up living," he said, "not before. I'm going to Carsett," he went on, naming a village about ten miles

off, lying on the other side of the market-town. "I shall get a week's reading."

For the first time since she had begun her story, Miss Lucas was interrupted. A half-articulate cry broke from Mina Chester, and she leaned forward suddenly, her clasped hands resting on the arm of Miss Lucas's chair, her eyes shining with an incredulous anticipation. Miss Lucas stopped short; meeting the excitement in the girl's eyes her own changed suddenly. A kind of wild regret flashed into them; a spasm of uncontrollable emotion passed across her face; and she rose impulsively.

"It's too sad a story, after all," she said unevenly. "Ah, far too sad a story for Christmas Day! I oughtn't to have begun it!"

Everybody spoke at once, of course, and there was a ring of strong personal interest in every voice. But it was Mina Chester's voice, low as it was, that seemed to dominate the confusion of sounds, as she said:

"But you will tell us the rest? Miss Lucas, you will tell us the rest?"

And it was to her that Miss Lucas turned, hesitating, trembling as if with reaction. She hesitated still, even with her eyes on the girlish face that was even agitated in its entreaty.

"You bargained that we should hear you out. As you have begun, should you not finish?"

It was Colonel Thurstan's voice. He had moved for the first time, and was looking at her with stern eyes. As she heard him Miss Lucas started violently, and faced him for an instant in silence. Then she turned again to the group about her.

"As you please," she said. "If your patience is not exhausted, I am not. Let us go on to the end."

CHAPTER VII.

MISS LUCAS GOES ON TO THE END.

THERE were dashes of vivid colour on Miss Lucas's cheeks as she sat down again. One hand was pressed on Mina Chester's fingers, but she seemed to be no longer conscious of the girl herself. She seemed to be hardly aware of the three pair of eyes which watched her, as though irresistibly attracted, as Stafford Ray, his wife, and Ralph Ireland prepared themselves once more to listen. She went on without pause or prelude, and her voice rang hard and strained:

"Geoffrey went away next day. His

father asked no questions as to his destination, and the dog-cart was ordered for him at two o'clock. Netta had been told that Geoffrey was obliged to read hard after the long holiday that he had taken, and that his father wished him to go away for a little while for that purpose.

"It had been a wild night; the wind had howled round the house, and the rain had dashed stormily against the windows. And every member of the party as they met at breakfast had something to say as to the impossibility of sleep under such circumstances. It was almost fortunate, it seemed to Lucy, that Netta came down so white and heavy-eyed, so evidently stupefied with severe headache, that she hardly seemed to realise the parting that lay before her. She was so feverishly anxious to assign the sleeplessness which had produced this effect to the noise of the wind and rain, that Lucy detected the subterfuge, and suspected that her friend had spent the night in grieving over Geoffrey's coming departure. Geoffrey himself was the one person who appeared to know nothing about the storm. He had slept heavily, he said. His sleep, however, did not appear to have been of a refreshing kind. His eyes were sunken and he was very pale. His farewells to Netta were said in a short half-hour that they spent together in Lucy's sitting-room. It was from her own room that Netta came down the stairs to the hall door when the last moment came. James was there, and Lucy, and several servants. It was with Lucy's arm thrown, carelessly apparently, round her, that Netta took her public leave. She was trembling like a leaf, and as the dog-cart disappeared from sight, Lucy felt her become a dead weight on her shoulder, and looking quickly down into her face saw that she had fainted.

"Everything that impetuous sympathy could suggest as a means of distracting Netta's mind from her separation from Geoffrey, Lucy did. She read to her, making her lie on the sofa meanwhile, and trying to soothe her aching head with every remedy her limited experience could suggest. She talked to her cheerfully of the future, tenderly of the past. And all the time her spirit was in a very tumult of indignation against the cruelty that could contemplate this parting as the beginning of the end.

"The two girls were alone all the afternoon. And after dinner—when Lucy's father did not come into the drawing-room—James made a brief excuse as to some business and went to his own room. It was his

last evening at home. Lucy went to the piano to find some safety-valve for the tumultuous feelings that she could neither control nor define; and Netta, after sitting by the window listening, slipped out of the room. Lucy did not know that she was no longer there until, a step behind her making her start, she lifted her head to find herself alone with her cousin. He came and leaned on the end of the grand piano, looking straight before him. She began to play again instantly, ignoring his presence. But as the last notes of her music died away, he spoke.

"'Lucy,' he said, 'I'm going away to-morrow.'

"There was no answer. Lucy was playing again, but his steady tones came through the music and she stopped instinctively.

"'I can't take back what I said last night,' he said, 'though I'd give something to do it; but if I seemed hard, I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart.'

"She did not speak, and he went on:

"'Is it all to go for nothing! Can we not make allowances for one another? We don't agree. But are we to part in anger because of that? Lucy, there's trouble ahead, I'm afraid. Must we add to its sum by making trouble for ourselves?'

"She did not speak for a moment, and the dangerous quiet of her tone should have held a note of warning, as she said:

"'I don't understand you.'

"But he had little comprehension of women and their ways, and he was not warned.

"'I think you do,' he said. 'To me these weeks have been the happiest weeks of my life. I haven't been quite mistaken, Lucy, have I? You do know, don't you, something of what has been growing in me stronger and stronger ever since I became a man? You'll let me speak to you now?'

"'No.'

"Lucy rose suddenly and faced him, every rebellious fibre ajar and quivering. His voice vibrated with earnestness; even in her excitement she realised that. But there was a tone about his words, an assumption of a mutual understanding which set aside the subject of contention between them, that maddened her. Her repudiation of him and all that he suggested came from her in a fierce torrent.

"'I will not hear another word. You have said already infinitely more than you have any right to say. I don't know what you mean, and I don't want to know.'

These weeks have brought me nothing—nothing but the knowledge that you and I have no single thought in common. If you have dreamed for a moment that I was learning anything else, that is only another proof, if I had needed one, of the distance between us. There's no mistake between us now, I hope; it won't be my fault if there ever is again.'

"She threw the last words at him passionately and incoherently, and before he could stop her, the door closed violently behind her.

"Lucy spent that night alternately insisting to herself that she was not lying awake, that she was not tossing feverishly from one side to another; and asserting that sleeplessness was the natural result of the just indignation that burnt in her against her cousin. She looked white and heavy-eyed to herself in the morning; and the fact served to add a fresh edge to her temper. Even Netta seemed to find her difficult to please, and avoided her. And even Netta's companionship was more than Lucy could bear. Just before lunch she ran out to the housekeeper's room with her hat on, and her sketching things in her hand.

"'I'm going out sketching, Mrs. Wilson,' she said. 'I can't wait till after lunch or the lights will change. Give me some cake or something to take with me.'

"She did not ask herself what it was that made it impossible to her to face that last meal that would precede James's departure. She only told herself fiercely that she hated him, and would not say good-bye to him. She did not ask herself what prompted her, when she found herself out of sight and hearing in one of the woods, to throw herself down on the smooth green path and cry till she could cry no more. She knew in her heart that she loved her cousin, and she hated herself for the knowledge. The fierce quarrel which his attitude with regard to Geoffrey's love story had caused, and the words he had spoken on the previous evening, had brought into violent collision her womanliness and her passionate pride. Her pride had conquered for the moment, but her womanliness was taking its revenge.

"She gathered herself up at last, and went on with swift steps until she emerged from the wood on the brow of a hill that sloped down to the high-road. The house lay to her left, out of sight; but the road itself was plainly visible, and sauntering along it, slowly and rather hesitatingly as far as Lucy could make out from that distance,

was a figure that she recognised. It was Netta, in the full glare of the August sunshine. She was coming from the direction in which the house lay, and though the high-road was not one which they often took, Lucy concluded that she was going to see a village child, a little cripple who had taken a great fancy to her. Lucy was wondering vaguely why she had not waited until it grew cooler, when the sound of wheels, approaching rapidly from the same direction, made her glance towards the bend of the road round which Netta had come. The next instant she had stepped instinctively behind a tree, her heart beating painfully. It was the dog-cart from the house, and alone in it, driving himself with his port-manteau behind, was James. He overtook Netta and pulled up by her side, bending down to speak to her. No sound of their voices could reach Lucy, but she saw Netta look up as he spoke; saw her hesitate, and then break apparently into eager speech. She saw James pause, and then answer her. She saw him lean forward and help the girlish figure up to the seat by his side. Then she saw him touch the horse with his whip, and the two drove off together. A vague feeling of surprise rose up amidst the dull aching of Lucy's heart. Netta had wished to go into the town, seven miles distance; and James, who was going to the station there, had driven her in. That was obvious, of course, though where the groom was, and how Netta was to get home again, was not so clear. Lucy went straight home and went round to the stables.

"'Who drove Mr. James to the station?' she said abruptly.

"'Nobody, miss,' answered the man she had addressed. 'Thomas, he had to go into town this morning to see after the new mare, and Mr. James arranged he'd drive himself in, and Thomas could meet him at the station and bring back the cart, miss.'

"Lucy turned and went back to the house. The question as to Netta's return was set at rest, and yet her vague sense of surprise hardly seemed to subside. Two hours passed, during which Lucy found all her usual occupations unsatisfactory, and then a servant came into her room with letters.

"'The second post, miss,' she said. 'Thomas has just brought them.'

"Lucy took them carelessly.

"'Has Miss Strangeways gone to her room?' she said.

"'I didn't know Miss Strangeways was in, miss,' the woman answered. 'She went out directly after lunch, and I haven't seen her since.'

"'She has come back in the cart,' said Lucy. 'See where she is, Sarah, please, and tell her I'm here.'

"Sarah hesitated.

"'I beg your pardon, miss,' she said, 'but no one came back in the cart except Thomas.'

"Lucy looked up sharply; the vague surprise seemed suddenly to have developed.

"'Are you sure?' she said. 'She went into the town——' Lucy broke off. She wondered afterwards what it was that kept her from saying then, or later on, what she had seen from the top of the hill. 'Go and ask Thomas,' she resumed peremptorily, 'whether he did not meet Miss Strangeways; or—no, I'll go and speak to him myself.'

"Thomas had no knowledge whatever of Miss Strangeways. He had not seen her in the town, he had not met her on the road, and Lucy went slowly back to her own room.

"'Netta must be walking home,' she said to herself; 'or perhaps she has only gone part of the way and is coming back by some of the lanes. Her thoughts broke off abruptly, and she went by a swift, unreasoning impulse, to see whether Netta might not after all have returned, and be at that moment in her own room. Then, on the same impulse, she searched the lower rooms and the garden, but no Netta was to be found. She might come in at any moment, but as yet she had evidently not returned.

"But moments passed into hours and Netta did not come. Long before Lucy would own to herself any sense of uneasiness, she was wandering restlessly about unable to settle to anything. Surprise had merged itself into a sense of foreboding; a sense which took no definite shape in her mind, but seemed nevertheless to haunt her. The shadows grew longer; the summer afternoon merged into evening. Dinner-time came, and Lucy and her father alone met in the dining-room. The latter took no notice of Netta's absence, but he talked to his daughter more than usual, not noticing, apparently, that her words grew fewer and her manner more preoccupied as dinner went on. Dinner was over, and she had risen from the table when she said impulsively:

"'Father, Netta Strangeways has not come in.'

"He looked at her keenly, but uncomprehendingly.

"'Not come in?' he said.

"'She went out after lunch,' Lucy went on. Her colour rose suddenly. 'She went along the Kingsford road.'

"'Do you not know where she was going?'

"Lucy shook her head.

"'I was out,' she said hurriedly. 'I saw her from the top of Crows' Hill, on the Kingsford road.'

"The instinct that had kept her from saying more to the servant had grown stronger; she alleged no reason to herself for her reticence; but she knew that she intended to keep her further knowledge to herself.

"'She went out at noon to-day and has not come back.'

"Her father rose, and walked to the window as he spoke, and then looked round at his daughter.

"'Have you any reason to suppose that Miss Strangeways intended to leave you, Lucy?'

"Lucy understood him, and her spirit fired up.

"'No,' she answered, meeting his eyes boldly. 'No such reason exists. She knows of nothing that could make her wish to leave us.'

"She stopped abruptly, and the colour surged over her face.

"'You have said nothing to her, father!' she said quickly.

"He looked at her for a moment with a cold displeasure in his eyes. Then he made a gesture of negation.

"'Certainly not,' he said. 'It would never have occurred to me to address Miss Strangeways on a subject that lies solely between myself and your brother.'

"He paused, and then said:

"'She may have lost her way, or it is possible that she may have met with some accident. It will be dark in another hour. The men must go out and look for her at once. Ring the bell, Lucy.'

"The alarm was raised. The men about the place were sent out in parties of twos and threes, but the evening passed into night, and no tidings came. Nobody in the house went to bed; Lucy herself did not even go upstairs. She thought afterwards that the heart-sick anxiety of those hours, the dread lest every moment should bring some terrible news, was easier to bear than that which followed. There came a time when she realised that

during that dreadful night she had hugged her tangible fears as some protection from that haunting sense of foreboding which had no shape. It was two o'clock in the morning when, the second search-party having returned unsuccessful, she sent a groom riding with a note to the village where Geoffrey was staying. And it brought her a strange sense of desolation when the man returned with the news that Geoffrey, after spending the whole day at the little inn where he lodged, had started at eight o'clock in the evening for a night walk. It was a freak by no means uncharacteristic of him; and it was characteristic also that he should have left no clue as to his route, merely announcing his intention of returning on the following day. The groom had left the note, and until Geoffrey should return to claim it, his sister was powerless to reach him.

"But when the day broke on that night of weary suspense, Lucy privately despatched another messenger; this time he was sent to the nearest telegraph station, and he despatched a telegram from Lucy to James, bidding the latter return home at once.

"The day must wear itself away before that message could be responded to. But before the afternoon was over, though no Netta appeared, news of her came. It was news which changed open-mouthed lamentation, conjecture, and prophecy into whispers; news before which the vague foreboding in Lucy's heart rose suddenly, as her fears sank heavily to rest. The station-master from a little village about twelve miles distant came over to the house and announced that Miss Strangeways had taken the London train at his station at five o'clock on the preceding day; and the description he gave of her dress and appearance left no room for doubt but that his testimony was to be relied on.

"Lucy shut herself up in her own sitting-room on the man's departure. She knew now that she must wait, and she knew what she had to wait for. But how the hours passed, in what bewildered tumult of incredulous feeling, I think she never knew. Evening was drawing on again, and she was walking up and down her room, when a step on the stairs made her start, and she turned, facing the door as it opened to admit her cousin.

"He had come to her straight from his journey; he shut the door rapidly behind him, and came towards her.

"'Lucy,' he said, 'my dearest girl, why didn't you send for me at once?'

"The throb with which Lucy's pulses had welcomed him quickened into keen life the indignation with which she was possessed.

"'Because I wouldn't believe my eyes,' she said. Her tone rang cold and clear, and she made no attempt at any greeting. 'Because it seemed to me actually more possible, more probable, that she should have met with some terrible accident than that you should have acted as you have done. I don't want to tell you what I think of you. I cannot think of you at all. Tell me where she is?'

"Her eyes were fixed full upon him and she saw his face change. He hesitated a moment and then spoke gently.

"'Tell me what you know,' he said.

"Lucy clenched her hands. Her voice was hardly to be controlled as she answered:

"'I saw you take her up in the dog-cart on the Kingsford road, and I know that you drove her to Exton station. Where is she now?'

"But before the final question had passed her lips, a sharp ejaculation broke from James.

"'I drove her to Exton station?' he said. 'I did no such thing, Lucy. I drove her through Kingsford to the Carsett road, and there I left her.'

"'That's not true,' she broke out hotly. She saw James turn white, and it seemed to lash her into ungovernable passion. 'If you left her at the Carsett road, how did she get to Exton station, five miles away?'

"There was a moment's perceptible pause before James answered.

"'Lucy,' he said, 'you don't realise what you are saying. I cannot tell you how Miss Strangeways got to Exton station. I can only tell you, again, that I did not take her there.'

"A harsh laugh broke from Lucy.

"'You did not take her there!' she said. 'Well, you sent her there, we'll say. You provided her with reasons for going. You told her what you promised me you would not tell her. And you persuaded her—my poor little gentle Netta—that it was her duty to Geoffrey to go away. What did you hope to gain by it? Did you think for a moment that we should not find you out, Geoffrey and I? Did you think for a moment that you could keep her hidden from us? Ah, Geoffrey.'

"The door had opened as she spoke, and as she uttered her brother's name she sprang towards him as he stood pale and travel-stained, and broke into impetuous speech.

"'It's all right, dear boy. There's

nothing to be frightened about. You'll have her again to-morrow. We've only got to make him tell us where she is gone.'

"Geoffrey released himself from his sister's hold and looked across to James.

"What does she mean?' he said hoarsely.

"I think she hardly knows,' was the grim answer. 'For the first time in our lives Lucy seems to think my word to her requires proof. Will you tell her, Geoffrey, that Miss Strangeways came to you at Carsett yesterday afternoon at about half-past three?'

"Came to me at Carsett?' echoed Geoffrey. He was speaking like a man half dazed by a blow, whose senses are only gradually clearing. 'Netta never came to me at Carsett yesterday. What do you mean?'

"A wild cry, half triumph and half agony, rang in Lucy's ears, and she realised that she herself had uttered it.

"You see!' she said to James. 'What's the use of your trying to deceive us? What's the use of your trying to hide the truth? Listen, Geoffrey,' she went on vehemently. 'You've heard, no doubt, that I am the last person known to have seen her, and that I saw her going along the road towards Kingsford. That's true, but it's not all the truth. I saw her walking along the road first. Then I saw him'—she indicated James with a gesture as she spoke—'drive up behind her, alone in the dog-cart, on his way to the station. I saw him overtake her, stop, and speak to her. I saw her answer him, and then I saw him help her into the dog-cart and drive her on. And that same evening she went away in the London train from Exton station.'

"The pallor of Geoffrey's face was giving way. Its half-stupefied lines were breaking up. He looked from his sister to James, and back at Lucy.

"But why?' he said, and his tone was still dull and uncertain. 'Why?'

"If he were man enough to own to it at all,' broke out Lucy passionately, 'I suppose he would say he did it for your good. He has never liked your engagement, Geoffrey dear. He thinks it better that you should break Netta's heart and obey father. He thinks you can easily give it all up and find yourself another wife. He knew it was no use to say these things to you; he had proved it was no use to say them to me. So he broke the promise he had made me and said them to the one person with whom they could weigh. That drive was his op-

portunity. He offered to take her into Kingsford, I suppose; she was lonely, poor dear—oh, why wasn't I at home?—and she was glad to go. When he had told her that she stood between you and your father, between you and your future chances, do you think he had to propose twice that she should go away?'

"Geoffrey's hand closed like a vice round his sister's arm. His face was awake at last, and his eyes were gleaming. He turned them upon James:

"Explain this!'

"James had not moved since Lucy began to speak. He stood now facing the brother and sister, his face set and white.

"The sentiments that Lucy ascribes to me,' he said, 'need no explanation.' His voice was very hard. 'She is quite right. I have regretted your engagement to Miss Strangeways, and I have considered opposition to your father's will useless on your part. The facts of my meeting with her on the Kingsford road are these: I saw her walking in front of me, and I noticed that she looked hot. I stopped, and asked her if I could give her a lift. She was very white and nervous, and she hesitated. Then, to my great surprise, she begged me not to ask her any questions, not to think it strange of her, but to drive her as near as I could to Carsett. She must see you, she said. She was so agitated that the thought struck me that she must have heard what Lucy wished to keep from her, and was going to you for comfort. I took her up in the dog-cart, we drove into Kingsford, and I do not think three words passed between us. I took her to the top of the Carsett road, and there she got down. She thanked me, far more gratefully than was necessary, and I saw her go down the road as I drove back to the station. I neither saw nor heard more of her till I received Lucy's telegram this morning.'

"There was a dead silence. The two men eyed one another steadily. At last Geoffrey said slowly:

"She never came to Carsett. I was about the inn all day. All the afternoon I sat out in front of the house, and the house is on the Carsett road. If she had come down it, I must have seen her.'

"James made no answer, and Lucy, no longer able to control herself, took up the word.

"His evidence defeats itself!' she cried scornfully. 'He wants to make us think that she had found out something, and went away of her own accord. How could she

have found it out! You and I, he and my father are the only people who know. I did not tell her; you did not tell her; my father did not tell her. There was no means by which she could have known unless he told her himself."

"Suddenly, James's grim impassiveness gave way. He took a step towards them, his face working, his eyes glowing.

"'Lucy!' he cried; 'Geoffrey! Good heavens, what are we all talking about! What does this all mean! You can't mean that you don't believe me! You can't mean, after all these years, that you don't take my word! Lucy!'

"But his appeal only hardened her. Perhaps because she was conscious for one moment of an intense desire to cover them with his word, and blot them out, the facts rose up before her, clear-cut and relentless.

"'There are the facts,' she said. 'We can't alter them. We can't do away with them. How is it possible we should believe you when you tell us black is white?'

"He turned from her silently to her brother.

"'Geoffrey!' he said.

"'She's gone,' Geoffrey answered. 'If you had no hand in getting her away, who had? When she is found again, when she tells us with her own lips that you are innocent, then we'll believe you, and not till then!'

Miss Lucas stopped. Her voice died away suddenly, and the moment's dead silence that followed seemed curiously weighted. Nobody moved; nobody spoke. Then Miss Lucas said:

"But from that moment to this, Netta Strangeways' lips have never spoken again, either to Geoffrey or his sister. Geoffrey followed her to London that night, but at the London terminus the slender clue broke in his hand. He followed every shadow of a trace; he gave his every penny, his every thought, the best years of his life to the search, and it availed him nothing. Netta had disappeared, and the mystery of her disappearance—if mystery there was—was never to be solved."

Miss Lucas stopped again, and again there was the same dead silence. But it was broken this time by an odd thrill that seemed to run through her audience. Only Mina Chester did not move. She sat with her cheek pressed down on her hands as they rested on Miss Lucas's chair. It was Stafford Ray who broke the silence.

"Is that the end?" he said gently.

Miss Lucas sprang to her feet.

"The end?" she cried. "Yes! It's the end as far as I'm concerned, Mr. Ray. Ask Colonel Thurstan if you want to know any more. Every one was to tell a story, you know. I am only the beginner. Ask Colonel Thurstan for a story to-morrow night. Perhaps he will tell you such sequel as there is to tell."

With a simultaneous impulse, all the eyes hitherto riveted on Miss Lucas turned to Colonel Thurstan. But he looked steadily at Miss Lucas as he answered:

"If you care to hear the sequel, I will tell it."

CHAPTER VIII. COLONEL THURSTAN'S STORY.

"It's been the most exciting evening I ever spent, really. She made me feel as if I were all pins and needles! Stafford"—Mrs. Ray dropped her voice suddenly—"Stafford, I do believe it was her own story she was telling."

About half an hour had elapsed, and the Rays were in their own room. Mrs. Ray's face was flushed with curiosity, and even her husband, though he was as quiet as usual, seemed a little stirred. His wife's words had been spoken in the impressive tone of one who announces an original discovery; and he smiled slightly as he answered:

"The same idea had occurred to me, Kitty."

"And do you think," continued Mrs. Ray, "do you think it at all possible, Stafford, that James is Colonel Thurstan?"

"Colonel Thurstan's Christian name is John," said her husband.

"Yes, I know," returned his wife. "But do you think, Stafford, that she was using the real names? It seemed to me that she wasn't; neither for the people nor the places."

"It seemed so to me, too, strangely enough," Stafford Ray said, slowly. "And something occurred to me in that connection which has answered a question that has exercised me mightily; namely, how you became possessed of two at least of your lodgers, my dear."

But Mrs. Ray was not attending to her husband's words. It was in pursuance of her own train of thought that she burst out indignantly:

"What a perfectly horrid thing for Colonel Thurstan to have done! I could not have believed it of him; could you, Stafford?"

"I don't believe it of him," said Stafford quietly. "There's a mistake somewhere, Kit."

"Mistakes don't last for years and years," returned his wife impatiently. "I wish I could think it was a mistake, I'm sure, because I have liked Colonel Thurstan. Will he tell his story to-morrow, do you think, Stafford?"

"I think he will."

It was obviously a foregone conclusion with all the party, when they assembled in the drawing-room after dinner on the following evening, that Colonel Thurstan's story would be told. The household had spent rather an unsociable day; and this was the first time they had all met. Miss Lucas came into the room with her face set into disdainful lines, but with a little quiver about her lips that belied the coldness of her expression. She sat down in a low chair with her face in deep shadow. As she entered, Mina Chester rose, hesitated, and then crossed the room to Miss Lucas, and sat down by her side. It was much the same movement as she had made on the preceding evening, but something about the girl's whole expression had altered in the course of the last four-and-twenty hours. All day there had been an absent look upon her face; she had hardly spoken; she had watched Miss Lucas's every look and movement; and as she moved to her side now, there was a confidence about the action which that one day seemed to have developed.

Ralph Ireland, sitting on the opposite side of the room, watched her face intently, and wondered wistfully of what she was thinking. On going to his room on the previous night, Ralph Ireland had bestowed no time on the consideration of Miss Lucas's story; it is doubtful whether his thoughts had been concentrated on it even while it was telling. But he had spent a long and sleepless hour on the consideration of something else. He had faced a conviction that had been lying dormant in him for several days; he had realised that he had met the girl who was for him the one and only woman in the world. This conviction was weighting his frank good nature with a humility and gravity that was new to it; and it was rather perplexing to Mrs. Ray, who was spasmodically trying to make conversation with him, while she wondered restlessly whether she should ask Colonel Thurstan to begin.

Colonel Thurstan himself was standing on the hearthrug talking to his host. But

by degrees their conversation seemed to flag, and a silence fell upon the room. It was broken by Mrs. Ray.

"Colonel Thurstan," she said, and her voice was by no means so careless as she had intended it to be, "are you going to keep your promise to us?"

Colonel Thurstan turned instantly. His face had looked stern even while he chatted indifferently, apparently, with Stafford Ray. It grew very hard now, as he answered courteously:

"I am at your service, Mrs. Ray, whenever you like."

He sat down in the middle of the semicircle, paused a moment, and then began to speak coldly and distinctly.

"It is Miss Lucas's suggestion," he said, "that I should tell you such sequel as there is to the story she told last night. You will find me a less fluent narrator than she has proved herself, I fear. And perhaps it is not incongruous that whereas her part of the story began with the happiness of youth, the little that is left for me to tell you is shadowed from the outset by trouble and pain.

"The events of which you have been told broke up the happiness of the home in which they happened once and for all. The effect that the loss of Miss Strangeways had upon Geoffrey could not have been calculated upon, I think, even by his sister, or she would hardly have encouraged him as she did in the bitter resentment that isolated him utterly from his world. The strength of his feeling for Miss Strangeways had been under-estimated by his father, under-estimated, possibly, by his cousin; it was the love of a man, not of a boy, and of a man, as events proved, of character such as no one had suspected. Her disappearance, with the impenetrable darkness with which it was surrounded, developed his love into a sort of monomania. From the day when he left his home to follow the clue that took him to a London station he never returned to it. He refused to see or to write to his father; he refused all communication with his cousin. He passed away from all the concerns of his old life, concentrating himself on the one thought and interest that had swamped them all. If he could have believed that his trouble might have arisen solely out of a living error in the judgement of the woman for whom he was looking; if he could have believed that Miss Strangeways had left him solely on her own impulse, and that no clue as to her whereabouts had been withheld

from him except by herself; he would have suffered no less acutely, but he would have suffered less bitterly. He believed that he had been tricked; he believed that the object of his search was deliberately kept from him, and all the stubborn pride of his race hardened in him day by day.

"His father did not realise at first how grave was the mischief that had been done. For many months he looked upon his son's absence from home as the outcome of mere boyish sullenness. It was only very slowly that any doubt of his ultimate return presented itself."

Colonel Thurstan paused, and in the pause Stafford Ray said in a low, pleasant voice, without looking at him:

"It seems to be assumed that it was impossible that the father should have told his daughter what was not the truth when she asked him whether he had himself spoken to Miss Strangeways. The possibility of his having brought about her disappearance seems, after his statement to the contrary, to have ceased to exist for the other people concerned. And yet, to an outsider, the reason for this is hardly obvious. Surely it is not inconceivable that the father, having acted as he considered for his son's good, might have further judged it wise to conceal his action? And, after all, it was but one man's word against another's."

There was a quick, rustling movement from Miss Lucas's dark corner as though its occupant had leaned suddenly forward. But Colonel Thurstan went on without heeding it.

"Such a thing would not be inconceivable, as you say, Ray," he said, "in many cases. But in this case it was so. I cannot paint for you in a few words the character which made it impossible. I can only tell you that it would never have occurred to Geoffrey's father—as he told his daughter—to humiliate Miss Strangeways by bringing her personally into his discussion with his son. He considered that with his command to Geoffrey he had practically ended the affair, and it had ceased to confront him as a matter of any importance.

"I will not enter into James's feeling on finding his words set aside by the cousins he had known from infancy. But I may mention that in his utter bewilderment, seeking in vain for some clue to the mystery by which they were all surrounded, such a possibility as you have suggested did occur to him. He had only heard con-

fusedly what had passed between Lucy and her father on the subject, and he determined to satisfy himself. It was one day nearly nine months after Miss Strangeways' disappearance; James had come to the house that was still nominally home to him on two days' leave, on an invitation, that was almost a command, from his uncle. The two were sitting alone in the dining-room after dinner, when Geoffrey's father mentioned him to James for the first time. He had been very silent, and he broke a long pause, abruptly:

"'James,' he said, 'where is that foolish boy?'

"James did not know. Geoffrey communicated with his sister, and his sister only.

"'He has wasted enough time over this childish business,' continued his father. The words were contemptuous, but the tone was uneasy. 'It's time he came home and settled down.'

"James paused for a moment, then he said:

"'Is it a childish business, sir? I'm almost afraid not.'

"For a moment his uncle made no answer. Then he said angrily:

"'What on earth made the girl behave as she did? That's where all the mischief lies! If she had not created all this mystery and set up his abominable obstinacy, he would have got over his boyish folly, as many another young fellow has done before him. It's all her doing.'

"'She must have heard by some means or other of your feeling on the subject, and she must have believed that she was doing the best for Geoffrey in leaving him as she did.'

"'Unless she meant to entangle him again in London and changed her mind!'

"James put the alternative aside with a gesture.

"'She was not like that, sir,' he said. 'The question is how did she hear of your feeling?' He stopped abruptly, and then said suddenly: 'I have heard that when Lucy asked you the question, you told her that you had never spoken to Miss Strangeways on the subject. I beg your pardon, sir, if I'm wrong—I've no doubt I am—but it has crossed my mind that you might have told Lucy this because you thought it better that she should know nothing of your action in the matter; and that it might, nevertheless, be from you that Miss Strangeways gained her knowledge.'

"There was a flash in his uncle's eyes

that James had never seen before, as Geoffrey's father answered instantly and sternly.

"I do not lie," he said, "for any purpose, however admirable. I hardly considered Miss Strangeways as an active agent in the matter. If I had been responsible for the melodramatic muddle of her disappearance, I should not have stooped to conceal it!"

"There is such a thing as moral certainty, and James knew from that moment that no solution of the mystery lay with his uncle.

"It was from this time, I believe, that a just conception of the state of affairs began to dawn upon Geoffrey's father. He had been waiting many years for the time when his son should emerge from boyhood, and become such a man as he could understand. He had to realise gradually now that he had waited in vain; that the period to which he had looked forward had passed, while his eyes had been steadily fixed on the future. He had to realise that the son upon whom he had counted was a creature of his imagination only. And he had to realise finally that the son whom he might have known, was lost to him for ever. He was alone in the creeping sense of disappointment and desolation that came upon him. To his other child, though no words ever passed between them on the subject, he was, in one sense, the author of all the trouble that had fallen upon the house. She never thought that he and she suffered a common pain. Raging against her own, she ignored his, and set a barrier between them which her father was not the man to pass. It was not unnatural, therefore, that he should turn tacitly to the nephew from whom he could claim, as a right, a son's gratitude and a son's affection."

Colonel Thurstan stopped. His voice had vibrated slightly, but when he went on again it was very hard and monotonous.

"His nephew owed him everything, and no claim made by him could be set aside. For the three ensuing years the regiment to which James belonged was stationed about ten miles from his uncle's house. And during those three years no week passed which did not see him there five or six times.

"His footing, to all intents and purposes, was even more intimate than it had been in the old days, inasmuch as the master of the house consulted him and relied on him for many little offices. Only his cousin Lucy and himself knew how totally everything was changed, and how he stood outside the life that he had hitherto

shared. That she endured his presence as an odious necessity, that she neither spoke to him nor looked at him except on sufferance, were facts that she never let him forget. And he was a fool, no doubt, inasmuch as his consciousness of them caused him the keenest distress. He had given no living creature cause, in all his life, to doubt his word. Yet she, to whom he might at least have looked for sisterly tenderness and trust, denied him both, and proved alike impervious to argument and assurance. He was a fool to think twice whether his presence pleased or displeased her, but his thoughts and his feelings were beyond his own control. He loved her.

"He hardly knew when it was in the course of the last of those three long years that he began to detect a new note in her tone to him. And when he did detect it, it was longer still before he realised what it was. One afternoon in the spring of that year, reluctant yet feeling that the task before him must be carried out, he went upstairs and knocked at the door of his cousin's sitting-room.

"Come in," she said.

"James knew from the tone of her voice that she had recognised his knock, and he went into the room to say what he had to say and to leave it as quickly as possible. Lucy was sitting by the table. She did not move, but her look as she faced him demanded an explanation of his intrusion.

"He went up to the table and stood opposite to her.

"I will not trouble you for more than a moment," he said. "I have come to speak to you about your father."

"She did not speak, and he went on.

"I do not think him well. I have been uneasy about him for some time. I am sure he should be persuaded to take advice."

"He takes your advice from morning till night," she said. "What more can he want?"

"Her words and the tone in which they were uttered, though their unreasoning bitterness did not surprise him, disconcerted him. He paused a moment and then said:

"I thought it right to tell you this, and to suggest that you should try to make him realise that he is very far from well. And there is another suggestion I feel bound to make. Your father is wretched for want of news of Geoffrey. Why do you never speak of him?"

"The colour swept into Lucy's face, and she rose and confronted her cousin.

"Why does he never ask me about him?" she cried fiercely. "Why does he never seem to care whether he is dead or alive? Why is he content to live as though he had no son? Because you have come between him and Geoffrey! If it hadn't been for you, Geoffrey would be here now. Now that he's gone you're taking all that ought to be his. Do you think I'll give him news of Geoffrey to be talked over with you, to be picked to pieces by you, to be made the worst of by you? Never!"

"She was shaking with passion, and James faced her for a moment in silence. Argument was useless; behind the wild injustice of her words he recognised her sisterly misery and her sisterly devotion. He left the room without a word.

"But from that time onward he knew that her jealousy of him for her brother's sake was one of the torments of her life, and if he could have done anything to spare her he would have done it gladly. This was impossible. Her father's state of health was, as he had told her, far from satisfactory. Unacknowledged grief and disappointment had told upon him heavily, and though he would not own to illness, he turned more and more, as his weakness developed, to his nephew. He took a dislike to his home, and as the summer drew on he rented a house for the season in Scotland; and James found himself practically compelled to obtain such leave as would allow of his going away with him.

"James had believed that nothing could be added to the already almost intolerable constraint of his position; but he found that he was mistaken. At home, his visits, frequent though they were, had been but visits; duty had constantly called him elsewhere. In Scotland his presence was perforce continual. Day after day he and his cousin were compelled to meet, knowing that the morrow would bring no change and no respite. It was the monotonous regularity of their intercourse that told so heavily; as a matter of fact, they saw, perhaps, even less of one another than they had done in England. The house in which they were established was situated in the midst of a mountainous district, and Lucy seemed to develop a passion for the wild hill country round. She was out of doors, when the weather allowed, from morning until night. She saw but little of her father; she chose to assume that James's society was all sufficient to him. Her cousin's words as to his health seemed to have made no impression on her, and she never noticed,

apparently, how he changed in appearance. The symptoms that had alarmed his nephew developed rapidly during the first two months of their stay in Scotland, and at last there came about what James had long foreseen. A paralytic seizure broke down the appearance of health that Geoffrey's father had so determinedly kept up.

"It was a very slight attack, however, and in a few hours its more alarming effects had passed away. Lucy's father was able to speak, though somewhat imperfectly, when he asked for his daughter, and James went downstairs to fetch her.

"It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and the September sunshine was flooding the drawing-room with light, when James opened the door. Lucy rose abruptly and came towards him. He noticed that she was looking pale, and he thought also that she had grown strangely worn and thin in the course of the last two months. A restless trouble in her eyes, which he had noticed there often lately, seemed to be making them larger and brighter than usual.

"'Well,' she said coldly, 'is he better?'

"'He is much better,' returned James. 'He wants to see you. Will you go up to him?'

"Lucy crossed the room abruptly without looking at James, passed him, and went upstairs. The bedroom door was ajar; she went straight up to the bedside. She started a little as her eyes rested on the changed face on the pillow, but she did not stoop to kiss it.

"'Are you better, father?' she said. 'Did you want me?'

"Her father moved his head feebly. James had stopped near the door, wishing to leave the father and daughter together, and he was out of sight from the bed. He heard his own name uttered now in his uncle's altered, difficult speech, and came slowly up to the bed.

"'I am here, sir,' he said.

"It was an invalid's fancy, evidently, and being satisfied as to his presence, his uncle looked slowly back at Lucy.

"'I sent for you,' he said laboriously, 'to tell you to write to your brother. Where is he?'

"There was a moment's dead silence; a moment that seemed so long that James, in spite of himself, glanced across at his cousin. To his intense surprise he saw that she was almost lividly pale; her hands were wrung together, and her lips were set. She did not speak, and the low, uncertain voice went on.

"He is my only son. I may have only a short time to live. Whatever he may do afterwards, tell him that I charge him to come and see me now. Where is he, Lucy?"

"Still she did not speak. Her silence began to take effect upon her father. He tried to draw himself up upon his elbow, stretching out one hand to James for help.

"Why don't you answer me, Lucy?" he said. The quiet command of his stronger days was lost now in the irritability of weakness. 'You are the only person with whom he has chosen to communicate. Why don't you tell me where he is?'

"He was growing excited, and excitement was dangerous. James spoke in a low, warning voice:

"Lucy, you must tell him."

"She looked up for the first time. Her eyes met her cousin's, and the fact seemed to goad her almost beyond her own control.

"How can I?" she cried. 'How can I tell him what I don't know myself?'

"You don't know?"

"The words did not come from James. Her father had raised himself.

"You don't know where he is? He has cut himself off altogether?"

"He let himself fall back heavily, turning feebly towards James.

"You are my son, then," he said. 'I have no other.'

"Before James could look up he heard a rustle beside him, and he knew that Lucy was gone.

"Nearly two hours passed before he could leave his uncle's room, and then he called a servant and asked where her young mistress was.

"She's gone out, sir," was the reply. 'I saw her go in a great hurry nearly two hours ago.'

"The news did not surprise James, but as he looked up at the sky, it made him uneasy. The signs of storm were gathering fast, and though it was only six o'clock the light was becoming dull. He knew what the confession to which Lucy had been driven must have cost her. He guessed something of the misery which the fact must have been causing her, perhaps for weeks. He loved her, and the thought of her pain was wringing his heart. That she should be wandering among the hills, oblivious in her unhappiness alike of time and weather; caught in a storm, perhaps exposed to the dangers that darkness created on some of the more precipitous mountain-sides near, was more

than he could endure. He knew which were her favourite routes, and taking at random the wildest and most lonely of these, he set out to look for her.

"The storm broke; and as he pressed on against it up the hillside, the whole country seemed to be swept by driving sheets of rain and mists driven before the wind. A kind of frenzy took possession of James. The thought that he might miss her; that the gathering darkness or mist might hide her from him, even if she were within his reach; and that she might have to spend the night shelterless, maddened him. He strode on, stopping now and again to shout her name. The mist was rising round him on every side. He had reached the summit of a wild, desolate crag, when he saw crouched against the rock as though for protection from the rain, a few yards from him, a woman's figure. He reached it unheeded in the noise of wind and water; and as he stood beside her at last a strange calm fell on him. He leaned down and touched her on the shoulder.

"She sprang to her feet, and stretched out both her hands to him.

"James!" she said. 'Oh, James, James, is it you?'

"He took her hands into his own and held them. He knew that in her welcome there was nothing personal; he knew that she was wet through and frightened, and that she clung instinctively to a man's strength and a man's protection. He drew her into a more sheltered corner and made her sit down.

"The wind isn't so cold here, Lucy," he said. 'Don't be frightened. You are quite safe.'

"She was clinging to his hands convulsively.

"Can't we go home?" she said. 'James, can't you take me home?'

"The world below them was blotted out to their very feet in a thick white mist. James knew that not an inch of path would be discernible, and he knew that on that side of the mountain a false step might mean death.

"Not yet," he said. 'The mist may lift when the storm passes. We must wait.'

"She shuddered, and sank down on a stone, hiding her face in her hands. She sat so for some time, evidently enduring with such patience as she could muster. The rain stopped gradually and the wind began to subside. As though the quiet had arrested her attention, she raised her head suddenly. The mist had crept up and

was about them now, and it was growing dark. She looked at her cousin with her eyes wide and startled.

"'James,' she said, 'when the mist clears it will be dark. Shall we have to stay here all night?'

"'I am afraid so.'

"She did not speak, but a long sigh came from her. There was a silence. Darkness came rapidly, and when they could no longer see each other's faces, Lucy broke into sudden speech.

"'James,' she said, 'what am I to do? What am I to do? I don't know where he is! I haven't known where he is for nearly three months now! He hasn't written to me; he hasn't sent me a line, and I feel as if I should go mad sometimes with sheer anxiety.'

"'You would have heard if anything had happened to him,' said James.

"'Not necessarily,' she said, quickly. 'He doesn't always go by his own name. But I don't think I'm afraid that anything has happened. He has been nearly as long as this once before without writing. It's the thought that he shouldn't care to write; it's the feeling that I have lost him; that I can't touch him, or help him, or do anything for him; it's the feeling that he must be so dreadfully changed not to care how much I suffer, or how lonely I am, that I don't know how to bear. Oh, James, what can I do? What can I do?'

"'Perhaps he was wrong, perhaps even then, with the broken voice of the woman he loved ringing in his ears, with darkness between them and the stillness of the night growing all round, a stronger man than he would have said nothing. I can only say that James was not strong enough.

"'Lucy,' he said, 'let me help you. Let us make it up as we have made it up so often before, and do our best for Geoffrey together as we used to in the old times. Lucy, it's a mistake that's come between us; nothing else. I love you. Can you not give me back trust, at least? Can't we begin again?'

"The quiet fell about them again, unbroken for a moment. Then he heard a long, strangled sigh.

"'Oh!' she whispered. 'If I could! If I could!'

"He leaned towards her, though he could not see her.

"'Why should you not?' he said. 'Lucy, don't you care for me a little?'

"'I do,' she said brokenly. 'I did.'

"'Then you believe me,' he said. 'You

believe me when I tell you solemnly; when I call to witness to the truth of my words all that I hold most sacred; that there is nothing that need stand between us. That I am as innocent of that with which you charge me as yourself, or Geoffrey.'

"He heard her rise with a low cry. He stretched out his hand instinctively to keep her from taking any step that might lead her into danger, and with his grasp on her arm she spoke.

"'I can't!' she cried, 'I can't! There were the facts. I said with Geoffrey when they were fresh to me that I would never believe you till Netta told me herself that what you said was true. I hold to what I said then, and I shall hold to it for ever.'

"Still with that touch on her arm, he guided her back to her seat. He did not speak; the night wore on, and still the silence between them was unbroken. He heard her shiver once, and put his coat about her. Once he thought he heard her sobbing. At length the dawn broke; she moved stiffly and feebly when he helped her to her feet, and as they made their slow and difficult progress down the hillside he spoke only such words as were necessary for her guidance. It was no surprise to him when they came within sight of the house to see that the front door was open, and that figures were moving about. But the face of the old manservant who met them on the threshold, struck him with a sudden chill. He glanced at his companion's white, exhausted face, and made a sign enjoining silence on the old man. But he was too late.

"'Thank Heaven you're come, sir!' he said. 'Miss Lucy, we've looked for you everywhere! Oh, sir, my poor master!'

"Lucy had gone on quickly through the hall, unheeding. But on the last word she stopped suddenly.

"'Is my father worse?'

"The old man turned to James, and as their eyes met, James went to his cousin.

"'Go up to your room, Lucy!' he said. 'I will come to you presently. Go up to your room!'

"But she put his words aside peremptorily.

"'I want to know how he is, first,' she said. 'William, why don't you answer me?'

"'You'd better do as Mr. James says, miss,' was the faltering response. 'He'll come and tell you presently.'

"'Come and tell me,' she echoed sharply. 'Come and tell me what? Is he dead?'

"She read her answer this time in the

faces of the two men. Worn out with the long night of exposure, the shock was more than she could bear. Without a sound she swayed helplessly for a moment, and her cousin caught her in his arms.

"The bare facts as they stood were sufficiently painful. The second stroke of paralysis which had ended the disappointed life of Lucy's father would have overtaken him in any case, sooner or later; and there was little reason to believe that matters had been accelerated by the non-appearance of either Lucy or James on the previous night. But the events that followed; the events that added bitterness to inevitable suffering; were the result of an accident, or perhaps, I should say, an oversight, for which James never forgave himself. It fell out thus. Every private paper found in her father's room, was by him taken untouched to Lucy. It was her right, and Geoffrey's, to look them over, and in that right James knew himself to have no share. He took them to her on the day before the funeral; and she looked up as he entered the room, pointing to a letter that she had in her hand.

"He has written," she said. "Geoffrey has written to me at last. Too late, you see."

"Her speech was hard and monotonous, as though the statement were wrung from her by her misery. James paused a moment, then he laid the papers down by her side.

"I found these in your father's room, Lucy," he said. "Will you look them over and see if there is anything that Mr. Davison ought to have?"

"She drew them towards her, and began to open them with quick movements, as though glad of the semblance of occupation. He hesitated a moment and then turned away. As he did so, she lifted her head and recalled him. Her face was quite white. She held a sheet of letter paper in her hand.

"Did you know of this?" she said.

"He crossed the room, took the paper she held out, and glanced at its contents. As he did so he realised that he would have given ten years of his life to keep them from his cousin.

"It was the rough draft of a will, drawn out in shaking characters, just recognisable as her father's writing, and bearing the date of the day on which he died. It revoked all the testator's former wills, and left the house and land only to Geoffrey, bequeathing all his father's money in two equal shares to Lucy and James. A moment passed before James had sufficiently mas-

tered himself to speak. Then he looked his cousin in the face.

"I knew nothing of it, Lucy," he said, "and it is so much waste paper."

"He was in the very act of tearing it across when she stopped him impulsively.

"No," she said fiercely. "It represents my father's will. Do you think either Geoffrey or I will dispute it? As far as you are concerned, what is written there shall be carried out."

"James controlled himself forcibly.

"It's not legal, Lucy," he said. "It means nothing. No use can possibly be made of it."

"Legal or not," she retorted proudly, "we shall consider ourselves bound by it. Be sure of that."

"He paused a moment.

"I can't discuss the matter further with you now," he said at last. "It's not the time. Mr. Davison will make you understand the position better than I can. I will only tell you that no power on earth could induce me to touch one shilling of your father's money."

"He turned away as he spoke and left her alone.

"But nothing that he had hoped from time, nothing that he had hoped from the arguments of her father's solicitor, came to pass. Lucy remained absolutely impervious to argument or to entreaty. She wrote to Geoffrey on the subject, and all that Mr. Davison could extract from him was a brief note authorising his sister to act for him. She took possession of the half share of his property left to her by her father, dividing it with her brother; and the other half was left to James. He never touched it, he never will touch it.

"There is very little more to tell. The death of Lucy's father broke up the home; and broke up the difficult and painful position of the past three years. James exchanged into a regiment on foreign service, and left England for many years. Lucy settled in London. He heard from time to time of her welfare through Mr. Davison. He heard to his unspeakable relief of her inheritance of a considerable fortune. And he heard also of her brother.

"He heard of Geoffrey as always wandering about the world; wandering aimlessly and restlessly, long after any clue to Miss Strangeways' whereabouts afforded him an object. He heard that he had sold the old home that had come down to him through so long a line of ancestors. He heard that his silences grew longer and

longer, until at last he ceased to communicate even with his sister. Then he heard that all trace of him was lost. The trio who had played together as children, the trio bound together by so many common memories of joy and sorrow, was broken up and scattered by the far-reaching influence of a fatal mistake."

Colonel Thurstan's deep, grave voice stopped, and there was a silence. There were tears in Mrs. Ray's eyes, and her husband seemed to be absorbed in thought. Ralph Ireland stared meditatively at the carpet. Miss Lucas in her corner sat absolutely motionless. Only Mina Chester knew how tightly her fingers had clasped themselves over her hand, and the close pressure was as unconsciously returned.

It was Stafford Ray who spoke at last. He rose.

"Thanks, Thurstan," he said. "You have brought us to bedtime. Miss Chester," he added lightly, evidently with an instinct towards breaking up the strained feeling of the moment, "we shall look to you for our story to-morrow night."

CHAPTER IX. TAKEN BY SURPRISE.

THE room at High Firs that went by the name of the library deserved its title only traditionally. The books that had once lined its walls had long since been sold. But it was a very pleasant room still; and the fact that some of the original substantial furniture had been left there, had rendered it habitable without much exercise of ingenuity on Mrs. Ray's part.

It was the afternoon of the day following that on which Colonel Thurstan had told his story, and the library had two occupants: Ralph Ireland and Miss Lucas; somewhat uncongenial companions, it might have seemed.

Miss Lucas did not often sit in the library; what impulse had prompted her when the party broke up after lunch, and Colonel Thurstan and Stafford Ray went out together, to settle herself there rather than in the drawing-room, no one could have said. She was sitting by the fire now with a book in her hand, on which her eyes were fixed steadily, but she had not turned a page for nearly an hour. Her face was set into cold, defiant lines, and she was very pale. Ralph Ireland was at the writing-table, engaged in somewhat hasty and perfunctory correspondence. He finished at last, pushed his chair sharply back, and rose; then he

hesitated. He came slowly towards Miss Lucas as she sat by the fire.

"Do you know at all what Miss Chester was going to do this afternoon?" he said abruptly and a little awkwardly.

Miss Lucas started, as though her thoughts had been far away.

"Miss Chester?" she said. "No; I didn't see her all the morning, and she said nothing at lunch. In fact, she was rather silent, I think!"

Her shrewd, kindly eyes were fixed full upon him with a smile in them, and Ralph Ireland coloured as he answered:

"She didn't speak a word! I mean, I really don't know. I thought, perhaps, she might have told you what she was going to do."

Miss Lucas looked at him for a moment in silence; her clasped hands resting idly on the book on her knee. At last she said gently:

"Mr. Ireland, is it the real thing with you?"

He made no pretence of not understanding her. The colour faded out of his face as he said simply:

"I love her with all my heart."

"Ah!" It was a sympathetic little sound, and under its influence Ralph Ireland turned away, and looked straight down into the fire as he rested one hand on the mantelpiece. "And she?"

"I don't believe I've got a chance," he said hastily. "I'm not fit to black her shoes, and she knows it."

Miss Lucas laughed softly.

"I shouldn't be so very sure of that," she said. "Both facts seem to me to be open to question. She is a little shy and wild, Mr. Ireland; you must be very gentle and cautious. But I don't think you need despair, yet, at all events."

"You don't?" The young man turned to her impetuously: "You don't, really? Oh, I say, Miss Lucas——"

He stopped abruptly. The door had opened as he spoke, and he saw Miss Lucas's face suddenly change and grow very cold and hard. The new-comer was Colonel Thurstan, and as he advanced she rose, without another word to Ralph, and swept past him out of the room.

Ralph Ireland was too much absorbed in his own emotions to feel more than the most transitory surprise. Miss Lucas had said enough; she had given him the word of hope for which he had been hungering; and, amiable young man as he was, her subsequent presence or absence was a

matter of slight importance to him. He received Colonel Thurstan somewhat incoherently and dashed out of the house, acting on the impulse to work off his excitement in the open air. He resolved heroically to act instantly upon Miss Lucas's advice, and to take none of the routes which he knew to be favourites with Miss Chester.

The weather had changed at last. The rainy spell had come to an end, and bright, frosty weather had succeeded it. And while Ralph Ireland had been getting through his correspondence in the library, Mina Chester had slipped out alone. Her walk this afternoon had led her in a direction she had never taken before, bringing her finally to the brow of a hill. Behind her, stretching down the easy slope and away for some distance, was woodland; the bare trees creaking and shivering mysteriously even in the sunshine. Before her the hill on which she stood sloped down to the high-road that wound away to the town seven miles off; and to her right, though out of sight, lay High Firs. Mina Chester stood leaning against the trunk of a tree, gazing steadily down at the road with eyes that seemed to see nothing.

Mina had seemed to court solitude throughout the day. She had only appeared among the party at High Firs when breakfast and lunch practically compelled her to do so; and she had then sat pale and quiet. The eyes that gazed so fixedly at the white, frost-lined road had an uncertain, pitiful look in them; and the corners of the grave mouth drooped. She turned at last, with a little catch of her breath, and began mechanically to retrace her steps. She went down the hill into the wood, pursuing her way until her progress was stopped by a gate; then, instead of opening it, she laid her arms along the top, and let her face fall forward upon them with a little sobbing moan.

"Oh, what a pity! What a pity!"

She stood there motionless, unconscious of the cold, unconscious that the short December day was drawing to its close. She did not even hear when a man's step came quickly up the path towards her; she did not see Ralph Ireland as he stopped abruptly a few yards from her. The young man's eyes were fixed upon the girl's bent head, and his honest face turned very pale beneath its sunburnt colouring. He stood there motionless, and still she did not move. At last he made a movement as though he would have gone away and left her. But

his heart failed him. He stopped abruptly and spoke.

"Miss Chester," he said, in a low uneven voice, "is there—isn't there anything I can do?"

With a violent start Mina Chester lifted her head, and as he saw her tear-stained, troubled face, he took two impulsive strides to her side, and spoke again before she had time to utter a word.

"Oh," he said, "won't you tell me what's the matter? If you know how awfully sorry I am."

Mina smiled faintly.

"I can't tell you, thank you," she said simply. "It isn't—it isn't my own trouble exactly."

Brief as her answer was, there was nothing about it repellent or distant, and Ralph Ireland coloured with pleasure as he answered impulsively:

"That's all right. I mean, I'm awfully sorry for what troubles you, but I'm awfully glad it isn't yourself."

"Thank you," said Mina again.

The trouble through which she was passing, vicarious though it might be, seemed to have softened her strangely, and as though it had created in her an instinctive longing for sympathy, she added:

"It's something I've got to do, too; something I don't quite know how to do."

Her voice quivered a little, and Ralph said desperately:

"Isn't it something I could do for you? It—I—I should only be too pleased, I do assure you."

She shook her head with another watery smile.

"Thank you very much," she said. "But there's nobody but I who can do it—nobody but I in the whole world."

The words were followed by a pause. They were still standing one on either side of the gate. The silence was broken by Ralph Ireland diffidently, almost awkwardly.

"Would you rather I went away?" he said. "It was so like an idiot like me to come thundering down upon you. I expect I oughtn't to have spoken to you, but I couldn't help it."

"It wasn't your fault," she answered; a little touch of colour had stolen into her white cheeks. "It was I who was foolish, and it was very kind of you to—to speak to me."

"It's getting rather dark," he suggested. "May I—may I take you home, Miss Chester?"

"Thank you," she said.

He opened the gate for her, she passed through, and they went on down the path side by side.

It promised at first to be but a silent walk. Nearly a quarter of an hour had passed before Ralph Ireland spoke.

"Miss Chester," he said, his frank voice sounded nervous and constrained, "would it bore you frightfully if I were to talk about myself a little?"

She had turned to him with a slight start. Her eyes were still troubled, but the distress in her expression seemed to have passed into abeyance for the time.

"I shall be—very pleased," she said rather shyly.

"I don't want to say much," he said. "Only I can't bear that you should think I've been quite such an idle chap as you suppose. You see, it's like this. Things aren't quite the same out in Australia as they are here. I don't mean to say that a man oughtn't to settle steadily into business there as well as here, or that he isn't a far better fellow if he does it. But what I mean is that there really is a good deal of work to be got, out of harness, so to speak. A man who doesn't want to be tied down needn't live an idle life by any means. There are lots of men I've been with out there who would tell you I'm not a bad fellow to work. They would, indeed."

He had spoken very earnestly, looking straight before him. Miss Chester did not turn to him, but she spoke quickly and gently, almost deprecatingly.

"I'm quite sure of it," she said, "if you say so. I didn't speak at all kindly the other day, I'm afraid. I know one may make dreadful mistakes if one decides only on one's own observation. I—I quite believe you, Mr. Ireland, and I oughtn't to have spoken at all."

"Don't say that," he returned eagerly. How is a young man to recollect injunctions to caution when he is met with wholly unexpected gentleness? "It was most awfully kind of you, and I know there is a great deal in my life that would seem like idling to you. But I mean to settle down to hard work, I do indeed. I'm only wondering how I shall begin."

"Do you mean to go back to Australia?" she asked.

"Yes, no—I don't know," he replied rather incoherently.

She looked round at him instinctively; their eyes met, and as a sudden soft rush

of colour flooded her face, Ralph Ireland stood still suddenly, and she stopped, too, perforce.

"Miss Chester," he said desperately. "If—if it could only make any difference to you one way or the other, I'd do exactly what you told me. I'd go in for anything, I'd settle to anything, here or there. I don't suppose there's the shadow of a chance for me—I don't suppose you care a straw whether I go or stay, or what becomes of me, but—oh, Mina, I do love you so."

She had shrunk back a little against the hedgerow and was looking up at him, her lips parted in startled, almost incredulous surprise, but with something that was not surprise and not repulsion struggling to life in her eyes. She made no attempt to stem the torrent of his speech, but as he paused she spoke.

"We don't know one another," she said rather breathlessly. "You can't have grown to care in such a little while! It isn't possible——"

"It is possible," he answered vehemently. "Time! What has time to do with it? And as to knowing one another, I know you enough to love you. That's all! I know you enough to know that I would do anything to please you, that I would do anything to win your love again. Mina, can't you give me a little in return?"

She was trembling from head to foot, and his vehemence seemed to sweep her into resistance.

"Oh, wait!" she cried. "I'm not like that. I can't get to know people and love people in such a hurry. I can't believe it could be real. Why, a month ago we'd never seen one another. Ah, what grows so quickly can't have deep roots."

"Sometimes," he averred boldly. "Why, the roots have been growing all my life. They're as strong as I am. Oh, Mina, can't you try to love me? I will wait; I will wait as long as you like; I will wait till you know me through and through, and I'll try every hour to be better worth the knowing. Or is it," his voice changed and faltered, "or is it that you do really know me too well? That you know I'm not good enough for you—you know you could never like me?"

She turned away, and her hands were wrung tightly together as the next words came from her, almost, it seemed, against her will.

"No," she said. "Oh, no, no, it isn't that! Only—it is so soon!"

There was a moment's silence, and then Ralph Ireland spoke again, humbly, but very resolutely.

"Then I shall wait," he said, "and till you say that there's no hope for me I shall hope. Don't think I'll bother you—I won't, indeed. Now let me take you home."

CHAPTER X. RALPH IRELAND'S STORY.

"Who is going to amuse us to-night? Somebody is prepared with a story, I hope."

The speaker was Miss Lucas, and the words were uttered abruptly directly the party assembled in the drawing-room after dinner that evening. The dinner that was just over had filled Mrs. Ray's soul with content. It had been the gayest that had yet taken place, and its gaiety had originated solely in Miss Lucas's flow of spirits. She had talked persistently, laughing alternately at and with every member of the party, Colonel Thurstan alone excepted.

Her flow of conversation had ceased abruptly during the interval that preceded the appearance of Stafford Ray and his men guests in the drawing-room; and her words on their appearance were uttered with a rather forced gaiety. Mrs. Ray answered her, cheerfully and a little dubiously:

"You are sure you are not tired of stories? If anybody thinks that ordinary talk would be pleasanter to-night, do let him or her say so."

Before any one else could speak, Miss Lucas answered in the same strained tones:

"Nobody thinks so, I'm sure," she said, "the stories have been so successful, haven't they?" She laughed a rather high-pitched laugh, and then went on hurriedly: "Mina, it's your turn, I think. Are you ready?"

Mina Chester was sitting rather apart; she had been very quiet all the evening, but the little air of severity which sometimes gave a certain hardness to her face was absent. She sat resting her chin upon her hand, gazing dreamily into the fire; and there was something indescribably soft and womanly about her unconscious preoccupation. She started nervously as Miss Lucas addressed her, and a wave of bright colour swept across her face.

"Oh, no," she said, "I'm not, indeed. I will tell a story—some time. But I'd rather not to-night. I—I couldn't."

She spoke pleadingly, and with considerably more agitation of tone and manner than the occasion seemed to call for. She

had hardly finished speaking when Ralph Ireland threw himself into the breach.

"I'll tell a story to-night, if Miss Chester doesn't want to," he said. "That's to say I'll try, you know, if nobody minds. But I'm afraid I shan't make much hand of it."

He felt, as he caught the instinctive look of gratitude that Mina Chester turned on him, that it was not of the faintest consequence whether he made "much hand" of it or not. He was only vaguely aware that his proposal had been received with enthusiasm by the rest of the company; and it was not until he found himself confronted by his silent and expectant auditors that he fully realised the position into which he had heroically thrust himself. He accepted it, however, with praiseworthy promptitude and energy.

"I can only tell a rough kind of story," he said, "because I've only lived a roughish life, and I haven't had any adventures worth speaking of, either. I hadn't much share in what I'm going to tell you about, only I saw it all.

"It was about three years ago, and I was knocking about out there in Queensland seeing life, and doing a spell of work whenever it came along, and at shearing time I was up at a sheep station right away in the bush, shearing for a man named Jackson.

"The shearing was a big affair; there were lots of us at it; and we had a very jolly time one way and another. But there was a man about the place who didn't seem to fit in anywhere. He was an Englishman, and he was a gentleman; there was no mistake about that. He didn't seem to be in any want of money; but he didn't seem to be travelling because he wanted to see things, for he took no interest in anything that came along. He was a tall fellow with white hair, though he can't have been more than five-and-forty. He had blue eyes that never seemed to see anything he looked at. Some days he would be about all the time, leaning against the doorway of the shearing shed, and looking on for hours at a stretch without speaking. Sometimes he would disappear for a day or two at a time, coming back as quietly as he went. He went by the name of George—whether it was his Christian name or his surname nobody knew.

"I don't know how it was, but he and I got chummy. It wasn't what one would have called being chums with any other man; we didn't talk much, but we used to have long smokes together. He never told me

anything about himself, and yet I got to know him.

"He never spoke of any future, and as the shearing drew to an end, I began to wonder whether we should go our different ways when it was over, and, perhaps, never knock up against one another again. I made a nice little pile at that shed, and I meant to go down to Townsville. I had some notion of going to some diggings and taking up a claim, later on, so I thought I'd 'hump my drum'—that's Australian slang for going on foot—to the nearest railway. It seemed likely that several of the other fellows would be going too, but it turned out at the last that only two of them settled to go my way, and these two were not just the sort I should have chosen as companions for a four or five days' walk. I don't know where they had come from, but I hadn't taken to them. They weren't altogether above-board, and there had been one or two nasty little affairs over cards. They'd both lost heavily all the time, and were leaving the station not much richer than they came to it. Their names were Carter and Maclean. I wasn't pleased when I found that we three were to tramp together, but one must take the rough with the smooth, and I didn't bother about it at first.

"The day before we were to start, however, Jackson asked me to do him a favour. He had some opal specimens that he wanted taken down to Townsville—very fine ones they were, and a number of them. They were worth altogether many hundred pounds. He'd known me, on and off, since I was a little chap, and he wanted me to take them down and hand them over to his agent. Of course I said I would, all right; and it was only when it was all settled that I began to bother a bit about my travelling companions. I went up to Jackson's house in the evening to get the stones, and I put them away there and then in my belt with my own swag. And it didn't make me more comfortable to find Carter and Maclean hanging about the place when I came out.

"There was to be a roaring supper down at the bachelors' quarters by way of celebrating the end of the shearing, but I didn't turn in at once; I thought, perhaps, George would be about. And by-and-by he came sauntering down towards me.

"'Off to-morrow, youngster?' he said.

"'Yes,' I answered. 'Four o'clock in the morning sees us off.'

"I wanted to tell him my bother; I

hadn't known it till I saw him, but that was what I had meant when I waited about for him. It was quiet enough where we were, but I spoke pretty low, too, as I said:

"'Look here, has Jackson told you that I am taking some opals down to Townsville for him?'

"He nodded.

"'Yes,' he said. 'And you're going with Carter and Maclean.'

"I hadn't thought that he knew so much as their names.

"'Yes,' I answered. 'It's all right, of course, but I wish there were some more of us.'

"'None of the other men going that way?' he enquired.

"'No, worse luck,' I returned.

"George was smoking. He pulled away at his pipe silently. Then he said:

"'Townsville will do for me as well as any other place, youngster. We may as well join forces.'

"Now, of course I'd often wondered where George was going when the shearing was over. But the possibility of his having no fixed plans somehow hadn't occurred to me, and I was just about as surprised as I was pleased. Still I didn't like the idea of his making a journey like that only to keep me company, and I said so, straight out.

"'It's no end good of you,' I said, 'but I'm not going to let you make a journey like that just to help me out of a bother. After all, you know, these fellows are probably on the square all right. And even if they're not, they don't know—'

"'Yes, they do,' said George quietly.

"'How?' I said, startled.

"'Mr. Carter did us the honour of listening when we began our conversation,' he returned. 'He's only just retired.'

"It was rather a facer and it staggered me for a moment. I hesitated a moment, and then I said:

"'How far would it take you out of your way?'

"'I haven't got a way,' he said, and his voice sounded awfully sad and strange. 'I like you, youngster, and it's settled.'

"Carter and Maclean looked sulky enough next morning when we mustered for our start. They went out of their way to seem surprised when they found that George was going with us, and it fell out naturally enough that though we all tramped together we dropped into pairs. We used to start at four o'clock in the morning and

walk all day, and jolly hot it was. And at night we lit our fire and made our damper, and lay down in our rugs. It was George's suggestion, after our first day, that he and I should not sleep at the same time; he had had his eye on our companions, and I made out that he didn't care about their looks. We did about thirty miles a day, and it was pretty stiff work; on half rations of sleep, too. But all the same, I enjoyed that first three days of our tramp more than I'd ever enjoyed anything in the same line.

"George was a queer companion—there was no doubt about that. Sometimes he would go for an hour at a stretch without speaking a word. But sometimes he would talk; talk as I had never known him do at the station; and then I've never known a fellow so well worth listening to. He had been all over the world, it seemed; he knew every place and every people under the sun almost, and knew them like a man who has lived among them, not like the ordinary sight-seer. And yet he seemed to stand apart from all the life he talked about, just as he had stood apart from all the life up at the station. He didn't seem to take any interest, or to have any standing anywhere. I couldn't help understanding, as I got to care about him, that he was a man whose life had gone wrong.

"What he talked of most, though, was England. He was always going back to the same subject—a certain English county and all its characteristics. He never said so in words, but I think he must have known that I understood it was his own native place, and I hope he didn't mind. He pulled himself up once, and said suddenly:

"'I wonder why I keep on yarning to you about the old country, youngster! It's not my way. I've been talking of things I haven't even thought of for years!'

"The stifling heat we had come through seemed to have passed over. We had come along over an ironstone ridge to the foot of a bit of a slope, when we noticed something odd about the ground before us. Instead of being all dried up and baking, it was moist and muddy; and, as we looked on ahead, we could see that the mud grew thicker and a bit slimy, too. We all knew what it meant, even without Carter's exclamation.

"'By Jove!' he said, only these aren't the exact words he used. 'The water has been here!'

"We pushed on with one consent to the top of the rise before us to see how the land lay beyond. I think what we did see was the most desolate sight I ever saw. I don't know whether you know that it happens now and again in Queensland that a hot season breaks up very suddenly with tropical downpours of rain, in which more inches of water fall in a night than London knows in a whole year. When this happens the dried-up land refuses to soak in the deluge poured on it; and, with every small hill gully draining water into the main creek, the water quickly rises into a flood and comes rushing down over the plains. The flood lasts for days—sometimes more and sometimes less—and then the water gradually retreats again, leaving what we were looking at as we stood on the top of that rise. It was a wide sweep of plain, backed by the hills from which the water had come. Right up to our feet and stretching away for miles in front of us was a sea of black mud, smothering every trace of vegetation, and bearing grim traces of the ruin which the water had brought about; dead sheep, broken trees, broken fences. It was varied here and there by pools of water, and through its midst the creek ran full and strong. Away on our right the water still lay in a great sheet; blue and shining in the brilliant sunshine that seemed somehow to make the ruin it lit up more dreary.

"Maclean, who was an old hand at bush-travelling, and knew his way about better than Carter, greeted the prospect before us with a speech that I won't repeat. What he said, in substance, was that we should have to go about ten miles out of our way. He was turning off sharp to the left when George stopped him.

"'Wait a bit,' he said, 'there's a house down there by the water. We're going to see if they want any help first.'

"It was the regular bush hut, one-storeyed, of course, equally of course with a verandah. I had noticed already that the water had come up to a good height round it. And I thought it odd that there was no one stirring about to do what might be towards putting things to rights.

"Maclean hesitated for a moment as though he were not quite sure whether he'd go in with Carter and make a row or not. Finally, he shut his chum up roughly, and said sullenly to George:

"'All right; don't let's be all night about it, then.' He evidently meant to keep in with us.

"George had received Carter's objections in perfect silence—that kind of silence that means immovable resolution—and he turned as silently now and began to walk towards the hut. I followed him, and Carter and Maclean followed me. It was beastly walking, and that is the truth. We were a long way over our ankles in mud, and as we got further on, into the middle of it, there was a horrid faint smell of damp and decay. There was no sign of life as we drew near the hut, and the entrance was shut fast. It was barred, apparently, inside, for when George tried it it did not yield. There were some pretty curtains in the windows, and the creepers, the tops of which flourished luxuriantly while the lower foliage had been soaked away by the water, had been planted and trained evidently with a view to making the place pretty and homelike. It looked awfully strange and desolate, somehow, in that sea of black mud. George paused a moment, and then he went round to the skillion—that's a kind of lean-to shed which is always part of a Queensland hut. The door of the skillion was shut, too. But when George gave it a strong push it yielded, and we stood on the threshold looking in. It was a little bit of a place, and it was as clean and orderly as anything you ever saw. The only thing that seemed to have got out of its place somehow, and to be at a loose end, was a little bit of an apron—a pretty, pink, woman's thing that was lying on a stool. George and I were looking in silently, when Carter and Maclean came up behind us.

"'They must have cleared out,' said the latter. 'We've had our walk for nothing after all, you bet.'

"It was George who stepped across the threshold, and we followed him. But coming to the doorway into the adjoining room he stopped abruptly; and looking past him from the skillion behind we saw what he saw, and stopped likewise, as a low ejaculation broke from Carter and Maclean.

"It was a small room, and everything that can be done to make a Queensland hut pretty and bright had been done to it. The walls were lined with calico and decorated with coloured pictures from old Christmas Numbers of the 'Illustrated,' and so on. Beside the ordinary hut furniture—table, stools, billy-can (that's the cooking-pot, you know)—there was a deck-chair drawn into a corner by the French window, and close to the chair, lying stretched out on the floor, was the figure of a woman in a cotton frock.

"Bush life brings one face to face with all kind of odd turns. I'd found myself confronted with some fairly unexpected emergencies before then, and Carter and Maclean must have been in hobbles of all sorts. But we were all of us as much thrown out of our reckoning at that moment as though we'd never been out of the beaten track in our lives. I think it was the homelike look of the place. It would have been different if we'd found the woman out in the bush; but there, with all her own surroundings about her, there was something so awfully womanly about her, and we seemed such a rough lot of men.

"George moved first. He pulled off his cap, went quickly across the room, and knelt down by her side. He touched her hand and felt her heart. Then he said sharply:

"'Get some water, one of you. Make haste!'

"I had noticed a water-butt in the skillion, and when I got back with some water George had got his flask out.

"'Dash some over her,' he said; 'over her face. That's right. Now again. Steady.'

"He was moistening her lips with brandy as he spoke. Maclean and Carter were still standing in the doorway looking on sheepishly.

"She must have been pretty far gone, I suppose; for at first our remedies didn't seem to touch her. She lay there between us, white as death and as still. She was quite a girl, very fair and slight, and her features were frightfully thin and sharp-looking, though they were pretty, too. At last her face quivered. Her eyelids trembled a little, and then they slowly lifted. She looked straight up into George's face with a pair of sunken, dim, blue eyes. He touched her lips with the brandy again, and then said in a low voice:

"'Don't be frightened. Can you tell me where you're hurt?'

"She hardly seemed to understand him for the moment. Then she seemed to get a little stronger.

"'I'm not hurt,' she said faintly. 'I—there was nothing to eat.'

"We understood the outline of what had happened well enough, then. And the facts in detail, which she told us by-and-by, when George had brought her round a little with such rough food as we had with us, were these:

"She was an English girl, and her name was Lettice Darrant. She had come out to Queensland with her brother about twelve

months before, and he had become what is called a 'free settler;' that is to say, he had taken up land under Government. They had had a roughish time of it at first, though she didn't say much about that. There's no telling what the loneliness of selections like that is to people who have never been used to it. They were nearly thirty miles away, there, from any other station. They never saw a soul but one another, except that the brother used to take his dray every four months or so to a station some five-and-twenty miles off to get rations; and most days, when he was out looking after his few sheep, Miss Darrant was left quite alone.

"About six days before we found her the dry season had broken up, as we knew, and her brother had gone out to see to his fences, sheep, and so on. It grew late in the afternoon, and she was getting anxious about him. She had wrapped a shawl about her head, and had gone out on to the verandah in spite of the still falling rain, to look out for him, when she saw something moving far up the creek. She put up her hand to shade her eyes from the light, grey and dull as it was, and as she did so she became aware of a faint, rushing, far-away noise that frightened her though she didn't know why. Then, gradually, she saw that the moving something was water. She saw it come rushing down, spreading as it came, and she stood there, paralysed with terror, until it was within a few feet of the little rise on which the hut was built. Then she rushed inside, shut and barred the doors and windows, and saw the water gradually surround her, rising till it was all but on a level with the verandah, and she was quite alone in what looked like a world of water.

"She had never heard of the Queensland floods, and she was utterly unprepared, utterly bewildered. But during that terrible first night, as the darkness came down, and she could see nothing and hear nothing but the lapping of the water round the hut, there was no room in her mind for anything but agony about her brother. The water had come from the direction in which she had been looking for his return; what the chances were, for and against him, she had no idea. She only knew that the world had become a waste of water; that he had been out quite alone; and that he could not swim. People say that any certainty is better than suspense. I don't know whether that's so or not. Miss Darrant didn't tell

us much about that night; and she didn't tell us, either, how she felt next morning when she stood at the window with the grey light shining on the water, and saw—swept by on the swollen current of the creek among a mass of wreckage, each fragment of which told its own story of devastation—the body of a man who still wore knotted round his neck the red silk scarf that she herself had tied there only the morning before.

"I don't think she realised her own position during the day that followed. It was the next morning, when she woke after an hour's sleep and went to get herself something to eat, that it occurred to her that the time had come round for her brother's expedition to the station and that the rations were almost out. I don't think she cared at first. It was only by degrees, as she came to the last of everything in the hut, that the awful desolation of her position began to get hold of her. The waters were going down by that time. They had subsided until they lay in a great lake on one side of the house only. But there was no help for her in that. To have wandered out into the bush, even if she could have crossed the tract of deep, black mud through which we had come, would have meant certain death; and Miss Darrant preferred to face the end, if it must come, in her own home. It had been drawing very near when we arrived. I think we all realised that we were only just in time.

"It was natural enough under the circumstances that we should feel—Carter, and Maclean, and I—that the lead in the affair belonged to George. He had brought us there; he had practically saved Miss Darrant's life. And it was natural, too, that Miss Darrant should understand this at once, and turn to George from the first. She seemed half dazed and heart-broken, though she made no fuss, and said very little. She had pretty, shy ways, and she thanked us all, as there wasn't the least need to do; but it was to George that her eyes finally returned as she looked from one of us to the other.

"It was towards George, also, that Carter and Maclean began to look, sulkily enough, as the afternoon began to draw on. They'd been out, prowling about the place, when they came into the skillion and called George. He went out to them, and, as I went after him, I saw Miss Darrant's eyes follow him nervously.

"'Look here, now,' Maclean began, speaking in a low, rough voice, 'how long are we going to stay here?'

"It was a pretty awkward fix we were in, there was no doubt about that. If we were to leave Miss Darrant and send a wagon for her from the nearest station, it would mean three days more of that horrible desolation for her, and it would be a very tight fit for everybody as far as rations were concerned, for of course we weren't carrying much more than enough. But the only alternative, of course, was to take her on with us, and that seemed to me so utterly impossible as to be hardly an alternative at all. George looked from Carter to Maclean without speaking. I think he hadn't quite made up his mind. And Carter said, without lowering his voice, like the brute he was:

"It's an infernal nuisance, take it any way. The best thing we can do is to clear out as quick as we can, and hand the job over to somebody else."

"What rations have you got left, youngster?" said George, turning to me.

"Before I could answer, however, there was a little rustling sound from the room behind, and Lettice Darrant stood on the threshold of the skillion. She was holding with one hand to the doorpost, and her great blue eyes, as she fixed them appealingly on George, were dilated and terrified.

"You won't—you won't leave me!" she said. "I can't stay here alone; I can't, I can't! I won't be any trouble; I won't, indeed. Only take me with you."

"Her nerve was broken. The self-control with which she had told us her story was all gone; shattered, obviously, by the thought of a renewal of the deadly loneliness of the past week. Her face was working pitifully as George moved to where she stood and said very gently:

"I'm afraid you don't realise what that would mean. Bush-walking isn't fit for you."

"It will be," she cried, not loudly, but with a kind of desperate ring. "I am very strong! I am, indeed. If—if you could wait till to-morrow I could walk any distance. But if you leave me alone again I shall die."

"George was looking straight down into her eyes, and I think he believed her.

"We will not leave you," he said. "Go back into the other room, Miss Darrant. We shall wait till to-morrow."

"There was a pretty average row with Maclean and Carter after that. And he told them they were free to go their own way and we'd go ours. They went off by themselves to consult, and when they came back, with a sullen acceptance of affairs as they stood, we both knew, George and I,

though we didn't speak to one another about it, what it was that made them stick to us. They would have left us there and then if it had not been for Jackson's opals; and we knew that we were in for a tussle of some sort before we came to our journey's end.

"I had seen George with women before up at Jackson's, I had seen him always what you would call courteous, but not in the least interested; and I wasn't prepared, somehow, for his ways with Miss Darrant. I don't know whether it was the helplessness in which we'd found her; or whether it was his sense of her awfully lonely position with four men; or whether it was her shy, gentle, uncomplaining ways; but from the moment when we found her, he just seemed to take charge of her, think for her, and help her unceasingly.

"Bush-walking is stiff work for a woman; plucky as she was, we only did fifteen miles a day, and what those fifteen miles cost her, though she never complained and never hung back, I didn't like to think. We couldn't make it less, because of the rations; as it was, it would just double the time the rest of our journey should have taken us, not counting the day we had spent at the hut; and on the second day George put himself and me on half rations without saying anything to the other two. But she would never have got along at all, I am quite sure of that, if it hadn't been for his constant encouragement and care for her. I don't know how it was that Miss Darrant first learned to distrust Carter and Maclean; first got to understand that something was up between them and us. But she did understand it in no time, though she didn't say anything about it. I believe she found it out somehow, though I can't explain quite what I mean, through her reliance on, and gratitude to, George. By the third night, I think she knew quite as well as we did that something might go wrong at any moment, though she didn't know what it was; and because she thought, naturally enough, so much more of George than she did of me, she thought it was he who was in danger.

"We had divided that night up into short watches. The nearer we got to our journey's end, the more necessary it was to be on our guard; and, all being well, we had only one more night of it before us. That belt of mine with the opals in it seemed to get heavier and heavier every hour. George took the first watch, and, pretty well worn-out as she was, I saw, before I went off to

sleep, that Miss Darrant meant keeping awake, too. She was awake still, when George roused me up quietly when the time came, and took his turn to sleep."

Ralph Ireland paused; his frank face was troubled, and he looked straight before him, fidgeting nervously with a paper-knife that lay beside him on the table.

"I don't come out well in what's coming," he said a little hoarsely. "I know that. I don't think I should have told you the story if I'd ever known any one else half so well worth talking about as George."

"It was deadly quiet out there in the bush, dark as pitch, except for our fire, which gave a flickering kind of light. Maclean and Carter were on the other side, still as logs. I heard George's breath grow even and deep; I heard Miss Darrant sigh faintly and move ever so little as if she were too tired to lie still. And then it was all quite silent. It's no excuse, of course, but I'd only had four hours' sleep for six nights now, and I'd been walking in the air all day; and I think when a man's on half rations, it takes it out of him a bit. The long and short of it is, I went to sleep—I must have gone off quite suddenly, for I never realised that I was even drowsy. I came to myself with a girl's shriek ringing in my ears, to see Miss Darrant shaking George by the shoulder, as two dark figures crawled stealthily round the fire towards us."

"We were up in a moment, all four of us, and it was a hand to hand struggle. It was Maclean who had fastened upon me; he was a bigger man than I am, and when I felt him feeling for something in his belt, I thought it was all up with me. It would have been all up with me if it hadn't been for George. He'd got Carter down on his knees, and the brute, who was a coward as well as a bully, had done showing fight, and was only struggling to get away, when George saw how things were going with me. Next instant Carter had disappeared into the darkness, and Maclean realised that it was two to one. He gave up the game at once, and was turning to follow Carter when Miss Darrant, with some wild idea of helping us, stirred the fire into a blaze. The sudden light outlined her figure sharply against the background of dark sky, and a savage imprecation broke from Maclean. His hand went quickly to his belt; I saw George spring forward between him and Miss Darrant; there was a crack and a flash, and the next instant George was

lying on the ground and Maclean had disappeared. Miss Darrant was quicker than I was; almost before I realised what had happened, she was down on her knees by George's side, and she looked up at me with a face I shall never forget.

"He is dead!" she said. "He is dead!"

"He wasn't dead, but I saw as I knelt down beside him that he was dying fast. He opened his eyes as she spoke, and made a feeble gesture to stop me as I tried to find out where he was hurt.

"It's no use," he said. "Leave me alone."

"The firelight was flickering on their two faces, and as I saw the look in Miss Darrant's eyes, I stopped moving and didn't speak, just holding him up in my arms."

"It's for me," she said. Her voice was low and hoarse, somehow. "You're dying instead of me."

"He turned his eyes towards her, and a little smile touched his white lips."

"That's all right," he said. "I'm glad to get out of it; glad it should happen so! Don't mind."

"He moved slightly and tried to lay his hand on my arm."

"You'll get her safely to Townsville?" he said. The words were coming very feebly with long pauses between. "She's safe with you."

"His voice died away, his breath came in great gasps. I couldn't speak. I wouldn't look away from his face, but I knew that Miss Darrant's cheek was pressed down upon his hand. Then he spoke again."

"I've liked you, youngster," he said. "Don't forget me! There's my ring, take it."

"Then, without any struggle, he was gone."

"The dawn came at last, though I thought it never would, and it showed me Miss Darrant's face as she crouched there on the ground, not much less white, and not much less still, than the face of the man who had died for her. I'd heard a lot about the beauty and the peacefulness of death, but I'd never seen it before I looked down at George's face with the grey light creeping over it. I knew I wasn't any good, and I went away for a bit and left her alone with him."

"I buried him that afternoon, digging a rough kind of grave in the sand of the creek close by. I took his ring off his finger, and tried to do what was right,

and when it was over I fetched Miss Darrant. She just knelt down by the grave and I did the same; and I think we both said a prayer though neither of us spoke a word.

"We got to Townsville the next evening, and I took her to some friends there. I took Jackson's hateful stones to his agent, and I wished I could have pitched my own money into the sea. There was no need for George to ask me to remember him. I wasn't ever likely to forget. And when I saw Miss Darrant to say good-bye before she left Townsville, I knew that she'd never forget either."

Ralph Ireland's voice had shaken suspiciously as he uttered the last words, and as he finished he rose abruptly, and with an incoherent exclamation about bedtime, went hastily out of the room. Nobody smiled, and a few minutes later the party broke quietly up.

CHAPTER XI. MINA'S STORY.

It was a lovely winter's afternoon, but Colonel Thurstan, as he stood at the window of the library, looking out, hardly seemed to be aware of the beauty before him. He was quite alone, and he had been standing in the same position with a heavy, settled preoccupation clouding his kindly face for many minutes. He moved at last, suddenly and abruptly. He went out of the library, crossed the hall, and opened the drawing-room door. He paused a moment on the threshold as if to assure himself as to its occupants, and then went deliberately in, shutting the door behind him. Miss Lucas was there alone, and as she saw him she rose quickly, and was moving towards the door without a word, when Colonel Thurstan stopped her.

"One moment, Anne," he said, and his voice was very stern and sad. "I won't trouble you for more than that, but I've come here on purpose to speak to you."

She paused instinctively, turning to face him with a quick, haughty movement, and he went on:

"I only want to tell you that I have determined to go away. I shall speak to Ray to-night and leave to-morrow."

"What shall you tell him?" she demanded quickly.

"Simply that business calls me back to London," was the cold response.

Miss Lucas made no answer; she turned away as though, his statement being made,

she wished to consider the conversation at an end. But she did not go out of the room; she walked absently to the table and began to turn over the leaves of a book. Colonel Thurstan did not leave the room either, though he seemed to have said all he had to say. He moved to the fire and stood looking down into it. Two or three minutes passed in total silence, then with an oddly simultaneous impulse each moved as though to speak to the other.

They were interrupted, however. The door opened and the maid appeared with tea, followed almost immediately by the rest of the party.

The sun had set, but the afternoon sky was beautiful; and though it was growing dusk in the drawing room, Mrs. Ray's suggestion that the lamps should be brought was negated by more than one voice. The fire blazed cheerily, its light dancing on the walls and throwing flickering shadows here and there about the room; and after tea was over and the twilight deepened, no one seemed in any hurry to move, and no one seemed inclined to break the silence that had gradually fallen on the party.

It was Mina Chester's voice that broke it at last. She was sitting looking out of the window at the fast fading light, and she did not turn her head as she said in a low voice:

"I am to tell a story some time, am I not? Mrs. Ray, may I tell it now?"

Everybody had started, more or less, or stirred as she spoke, as though his or her thoughts had strayed far away in the quiet. Mrs. Ray hesitated a moment, then she said tentatively:

"I think it would be very nice—that is, if every one else likes."

"I should like it of all things," said Miss Lucas's voice. "It's an excellent suggestion."

Still Mina Chester did not look round. Her hands were clasped together tightly on her knee, and Ralph Ireland, glancing at her, saw that her face looked very pale in the half light.

"I shan't be long," she began; "it's—it's quite a short story. It's about—my mother."

She paused a moment with a little catch of her breath, that only Ralph Ireland noticed, and then went on again with a hesitating tone:

"I was always with my mother when I was little. She died when I was fourteen,

and we'd never been apart for a day till then. She hadn't any companion to speak of except me. My father—he died a year later—was a great deal away from home, and, though I know he meant to be kind, I fancy now that he didn't quite understand how much a woman wants besides a comfortable house and enough money. My mother was ill for a long time before she died, and she got, through being weak I think, to be a little afraid of his silent ways. She used to stay in her own room a great deal, and I used to stay with her. She used to make all kinds of little occupations for herself that would keep us there; and one evening she made me bring her a box of old papers that she said she wanted to sort and put in order. They were not very interesting: bills, and receipts, and letters from people I knew quite well; but by-and-by I came to an old sheet of writing-paper, so old and brown that it must have lain in that box for years. I showed it to her and asked her what it was, and she took it into her hands and looked at it with such a strange expression in her eyes, almost as though she were looking at a ghost. Then a little sad smile just touched her lips.

"'I didn't know this was here,' she said dreamily, 'I thought I'd destroyed it long ago. What is it, Mina? Why, it's only a note, my child.'

"'It's very old, mother,' I said.

"She smiled again. 'Yes,' she said, 'it is, very old—as old as your mother's first love.'

"I suppose all girls, when they can't help seeing that their father and mother are not quite the same kind of person, wonder how they came to be married. I had wondered often, and I somehow knew at once it wasn't my father of whom she was speaking; and I suppose I looked curious, and excited, or something of that sort, for she glanced down at my face—I was kneeling at the table by her side—and a little flush came into her pale cheeks as she touched my hair with her fingers.

"'Do you want to hear about it, Mina?' she said; 'well, there's no harm now. It's such a long, long time ago, and I think I should like to tell you.'

"I sat down on the stool at her feet, and she began, speaking rather dreamily, and now and then stroking my hair. This is what she told me:

"Her girlhood had not been a very happy one. She had been always too shy and too

gentle to meet the world on its own ground—she didn't say this to me, but I had known it for a long time—and she had had no one to take care of her and protect her as she ought to have been protected. She was a governess, and she was not happy in her work or fortunate in her surroundings. She had one great friend; a girl with whom she had been at school."

Mina Chester stopped for an instant; then she continued very softly.

"Although so many years had gone by," she said, "my mother's love for her friend was as tender on the day when she told me the story as it was when the two were girls together. She lingered over the past as she told me of their friendship with a kind of loving gratitude which I can hardly put into words. It must have been one of those friendships which grow out of unlikeness, I think, for her friend was everything that my mother was not; high-spirited, impulsive, self-reliant. My mother went to see her once or twice for a day or two at a time at her home in the country after they left school, and she told me that she was never so happy in her life as when her friend asked her, one year when she had been ill, to go to her for a long visit while she grew strong again."

Mina Chester paused. Her breath seemed to have failed her for the moment. But an extraordinary hush had fallen on the room, and nobody spoke. The only light now was the light of the fire, and the figures revealed by the fitful glow might have been so many statues of attention. A little quivering sigh parted the girl's lips, and then she went on again:

"My mother had been practically alone with her friend when she stayed with her before. Her friend had no mother, and the father seemed to count for very little in his daughter's life. My mother had seen a cousin of her friend, and she knew that there was one brother; but it was not until she went there for that long summer visit that she and the brother met. I think my mother looked back upon the weeks that followed that meeting as upon a dream, from which all the pain of waking could not take its happiness as it lay always in her memory. They were both very young, she told me, and he told her afterwards that he had loved her from the moment when he saw her. If my mother had told him all that was in her heart, she would have said the same to him. Six weeks passed by; they were constantly together, and asked for nothing further.

Then he spoke. He asked her to be his wife, and she gave him her answer, feeling that life had nothing more to offer. And then, just as she knew what happiness meant, it all came to an end.

"She never could quite understand, she told me, though she went over it all again and again afterwards, when it was or how it was that she first became aware of something wrong. But before the day that followed her engagement was over, she knew that the perfect serenity of the atmosphere about her had changed. He was the same—the same, at least, to her; but he seemed preoccupied and depressed. His sister was as affectionate as any girl could be; but there was that about her which made my mother feel, even more strongly than she felt it with him, that something had happened. She was too shy to ask what was the matter. She did not speak of her fears even when her friend told her lightly, and as a matter of little consequence, that her brother was under orders from his father to read hard for the rest of the vacation; and that he was to go the next day to a little village ten miles away, on the other side of the market town, for quiet and concentration. But the news seemed to chime in with the trouble in her heart. She accepted it quietly, almost without comment indeed; but the conviction that there was something behind, something of which she was not told—a conviction fostered, even if it was not wholly created, by her friend's pronounced carelessness of manner as she told her the facts—was not to be set aside; and by the time night came she was miserably restless and uneasy.

"It was a wild night, and the rain was dashing drearily against her windows as she sat down in her room and tried to reason herself out of the vague fears that troubled her; tried to assure herself that there was nothing more in the separation than the next day was to bring about than appeared upon the surface; tried to persuade herself that she was sleepy, and that the night would soon pass. But it was of no use, and she gave it up at last. The wind was howling and shrieking round the house; she was wide awake and very unhappy, and she determined to take a book and try to read. If she had acted differently then, if she had gone to bed and to sleep that night, all her life after might have been different."

Again Mina paused; or rather her voice

seemed to die away quiveringly into nothing. The hush that had fallen on the room had grown deeper, and in the moment's dead silence that ensued, a slight sound was very audible. Colonel Thurstan was seated out of the range of the firelight, in deep shadow; the slight sound was the creaking of his chair as he leaned forward, cleaving his hand upon its arm. No one glanced at him; Stafford Ray was looking steadily before him, his wife's eyes were fixed upon the ground; Ralph Ireland was watching Mina Chester. Miss Lucas happened to be sitting on the same side of the hearth as Colonel Thurstan; but the firelight was full upon her. She was leaning back in her chair, gazing across the room at Mina with eyes that seemed absolutely to burn in her dead-white face. Her brows were drawn together, and her lips were set into a strange, pale line. It was not singular that on the dead silence that awaited her words, the girlish voice fell somewhat falteringly as Mina went on:

"There were not many books in my mother's room, and at first she thought it didn't matter, and that anything would do. I think she really didn't want to read, only to have a cover for her thoughts. And I think, too, that as she sat there all alone, dwelling on her fears, they grew worse and worse. For as the time passed on, she did not grow more inclined to sleep, but only more nervous and distressed. At last she began to try to distract her thoughts in earnest. She tried first one book and then another, but she knew them all quite well, and they didn't interest her. The howling of the storm seemed to get between her senses and the words she read.

"It was half-past two by this time, and it gradually came into her head that she could go downstairs very quietly and fetch a new Mudie book that she had left in the drawing-room. She knew that no one could hear her, and she was not afraid of the silence and darkness of the sleeping house, only of her own thoughts. She lighted her candle, opened her bed-room door very softly, and went downstairs. She found her book quite easily, and was just coming out of the drawing-room into the hall, when a slight sound from the landing above made her stop suddenly. The house was quite dark, except for the candle that she carried, and though she had had no thought of being afraid, as I said, that slight sound coming out of

the darkness startled her. It was followed by an interval of total silence; an interval in which the only sound was the wild howling of the storm, which seemed, there in the empty hall, to dash itself against the house like some fierce presence trying to get in. My mother stood and listened with her heart beating painfully. Then she heard something that nearly made it stop beating for the moment altogether. There was no sign of any moving light, but down the dark stairs, behind the bend, footsteps were coming towards her.

"Timid people will do brave things sometimes, even if it is only desperation that urges them. My mother stood quite still, holding up her candle so that its light might be thrown as far as possible, waiting for the figure that was coming down the stairs. In another instant the steps had come round the bend, and she saw"—Mina Chester hesitated a moment, and then said softly—"her lover. He was in evening dress, just as she had seen him three hours before, he had an open letter in his hand, and for a moment, as he came straight across the hall, a wild idea shot through my mother's mind that he had heard her come downstairs and wanted to speak to her.

"'What is it?' she said in a kind of breathless whisper. 'What is it?'

"He stopped instantly, gazing straight at her, and then she realised for the first time, and with a thrill of indescribable awe, that he did not see her. His eyes were wide open, but they were without expression of any kind. His face was very pale, and his lips moved as if he were talking to himself, but for a moment no words were audible. He was walking in his sleep."

"Ah!"

Whether it was a stifled cry, or a sob that broke from Miss Lucas nobody knew. Stafford Ray saw Colonel Thurstan lean forward in his chair and lay a firm, detaining touch upon her as she half started from her seat. And he made a quick sign to his wife which kept Mrs. Ray motionless. There was an instant during which the only sound in the room was Miss Lucas's quick, uneven breathing, as she sank back again into her seat; and then Mina Chester went on:

"He stood looking at her like that, and my mother waited, terrified and bewildered, not knowing what she ought to do. Then some sense of the words she had spoken seemed to penetrate to his brain.

"'Nothing,' he said. 'We can't tell you anything about it, because it might worry you.' He paused a moment, and then went on in the same odd, unnatural tone: 'I've no more to say, sir. My mind is quite made up. I am sorry to differ from you, but you must allow me to decide for myself.'

"A ghostly sense of unreality was creeping over my mother. She could not move or speak. They stood there face to face in the circle of pale light thrown by her candle, and all about them were the shadows of night. They stood there face to face, and close beside them, intangible, with its sad shape looming faintly out of the dimness, was the presence that had haunted my mother all day—the presence of coming trouble; and they and it were quite alone together. She did not speak; but some vague sense of companionship seemed to penetrate him.

"'A week,' he said. 'He thinks a week will be enough to bring me to his way of thinking. Just look here.'

"He held out the letter in his hand as he spoke, and as my mother took it from him mechanically, he said peremptorily:

"'Read it. Read it.'

"Bewildered and confused, and with that sense of unreality growing stronger upon her moment by moment, she obeyed. I have the letter here; it is the letter I found among her papers. This is what it said:

"'I wish to have no further argument with you until you have had time to consider the subject. Leave home to-morrow for a week. If at the end of that time you are not prepared to yield the obedience that a father has a right to exact; if you persist in this marriage which I distinctly forbid; I shall deprive you of the inheritance for which you look as my son.'

"My mother's eyes rested upon the words as though the little sheet of paper fascinated her. They seemed to bring her no shock. The writer of that letter had been ignored in her lover's calculations, ignored, consequently, in her own thoughts. But that this should be the shape into which her vague anticipations must finally resolve themselves; that his father's will should rise up suddenly and stand between her and the man who had asked her to be his wife; seemed as natural to her, in her strained state of nerves, as though she had expected it all the time.

"How long the silence lasted she never knew. She was roused at last by that far-away, unnatural voice.

"My father will do as he likes, of course," it said. "And I shall do as I like. But I won't have her told! I won't have her told!"

"He turned as he spoke, and moved across the hall with rapid, assured steps. Dazed and stupefied, not knowing what to do, hardly feeling, in the immense distance created between them by his unconsciousness, that it was indeed himself, my mother watched him go. She saw him disappear into the darkness; she heard him go on with the same quick, light step in the direction of his own room; she heard his footsteps die away, and she was all alone once more in the sleeping house, with his father's letter in her hand.

"She reached her room again somehow; reached it with all her vague apprehensions focussed and shaped into one overwhelming weight of trouble; a weight of which that little sheet of paper seemed to be the outward sign and token. To get rid of that letter so strangely come by—to return it to its owner—was her first impulse. But the thought brought her face to face with the question that seemed to be pressing upon her from all sides. What ought she to do in the matter? What ought she to say?

"I don't think"—Mina Chester's voice shook a little—"I don't think she really thought for a moment of accepting the sacrifice which her lover was prepared to make for her. I think she felt from the first that it was all over, and that her happiness had been a dream and nothing more. But she shrank so terribly from the task which lay before her. The words that she must speak; the parting, that they must bring about; rose up before her as almost unendurable pain.

"She went downstairs the next morning feeling like a shadow in a dream; she might have thought it all a dream, indeed, but for the terrible reality of that little letter. She spoke of the wind and the rain, when her friend exclaimed at her pale face, and said that the sleeplessness which they had caused had given her a headache. She found herself alone with her lover as the morning went on, but she was not ready; the words would not come. She could not tell him, in the face of the assumed carelessness with which he alluded to his departure, that she knew its cause and all that it involved; and

she saw him go away with her secret untold.

"But the weight of her unsuspected misery grew heavier and heavier. Some instinct kept her from speaking on this subject to any one but himself. Dearly as she loved his sister, it seemed to lie between himself and her alone, and her first words on the subject must be to him. By the time the next night, with its long procession of sleepless hours, had gone by, her yearning to speak those words was almost more than she could bear. She could settle to nothing; the necessity for keeping up even the semblance of employment strained her faculties to the utmost; and finding herself, after luncheon, quite alone, she wandered restlessly out of the house, heedless of the burning August sun, and strayed instinctively, with no definite consciousness as yet of the impulse which was forming itself in her mind, into the road which led to the village, ten miles away, where her lover was staying. She was walking slowly along, thinking vaguely of the distance, when she heard wheels behind her, and, glancing round, saw that she was being overtaken by the dog-cart from the house. The only person in it was her friend's cousin.

"I haven't said anything about him, but he had been in the house all the time, and my mother liked him and respected him with all her heart, though I think she was a little in awe of him. He had been kind and gentle with her ever since the beginning of her visit, but during the last two painful days she had fancied—her perceptions were quickened by her great unhappiness, perhaps—that she detected something even unusually considerate, and perhaps pitying in his manner. And as she saw him driving towards her now, the thought seemed suddenly to start up in her mind that here was the one person in the world who would help her kindly and discreetly; asking no questions; putting her to no unnecessary pain. She waited for him, trembling a little, hardly knowing even then what she meant to do.

"He drew up beside her and asked her gently—something; she hardly knew what. And the grave gentleness of his tone put the finishing touch to the impulse that the sight of the dog-cart had created in her. Almost before she knew what she meant to say, she found herself telling him wildly that she must see his cousin; that it was so desperately necessary that she should see him that she must walk to him if no other

way offered; that if he would take her in the dog-cart as far as the market town she would be grateful to him as long as she lived. She saw him hesitate a moment, and she saw his face grow very grave and compassionate. Then with the simplest word of assent he helped her into the dog-cart and drove on.

"He did not speak throughout the drive that followed, neither did my mother. Without a word he drove her through the town to the top of the road by which her way lay; and when he finally helped her out of the dog-cart, half the intensity of her gratitude to him was for his merciful silence. She walked on along the road, and he turned round and drove away

"It was three miles still to the village for which my mother was bound. But the main difficulty of the journey was surmounted, and my mother had burnt her ships behind her. And now that she was pledged, so to speak, to that interview with her lover for which she had so craved, a sudden wave of overwhelming doubt and fear rose up upon her. He must give her up; on that point there was no shadow of question in her mind; she would not stand between him and his father's favour, between him and all his future hopes. But could he be persuaded? Would her arguments prevail with him? Would she herself have strength and courage to combat his assurances, his pleadings, perhaps even his reproaches? She was all alone there in the road; adrift, practically, in a strange part of the country, and as these thoughts crowded upon her, my mother stood still and began to reflect. Was she indeed doing the best that could be done? Was there no way of sparing him—of sparing both—the scene that lay before them?

"How it first gradually occurred to her that there was another way, my mother could never tell me. In what shape or form the idea on which she subsequently acted first presented itself to her she never knew. To go away—to go away secretly; to disappear out of his life leaving no trace by which he could find her; and thus to set him free. This was the idea with which she found herself almost familiar before she realised that it had even suggested itself to her.

"It was such a desperate cutting of the knot as suggests itself occasionally to timid and gentle natures. My mother could not face the pain of parting; she could not trust herself within the circle of her lover's

influence. But she could nerve herself to leave him, believing that it was for his good, without a word or sign; and she could trust herself to be true to her purpose even through the long lonely heart-break that must lie before her.

"The means of carrying her plan into action arranged themselves before her rapidly and almost unconsciously. Half an hour after the dog-cart left her, she was walking rapidly, and like one who dreads pursuit, in the direction of a little station of which she knew about five miles off. From thence she took the train to London, and there she deliberately destroyed all traces of her whereabouts. She had no means of knowing what passed in the home she had left; she had no means of ever learning how her lover bore her disappearance. She had crushed out all her own hopes of happiness for his sake, and I think it was not unnatural that she should persuade herself that she had not sacrificed herself in vain, and that in time he would forget her, and make some happier girl his wife. To think so was her only consolation. Her health gave way, and all her hope and energy seemed gradually to decay. She married my father two years later; married him, gratefully and confessedly, for the protection and support that he could give her. But the story of the one love of her life hangs round this old faded letter. She made a mistake; ah, I know, I know she made a mistake, but it was for his sake she did it, and she is dead."

The girlish voice quivered pitifully, broke, and stopped. Mina Chester rose and crossed the room in the darkness to where Miss Lucas sat. She laid a folded letter, yellow and worn with age, gently in her hand, and then went quickly out of the room.

The fire had sunk to a dull red glow, and in the dim uncertain light, figures might rise, move silently, and so depart unnoticed. Five minutes later a man and a woman were left alone, motionless and silent. Then the man rose slowly. He, too, went away, and the woman was left alone.

CHAPTER XII. IN SPITE OF ALL.

It is impossible to say what it is that creates mental atmosphere in a house; but it is equally impossible to deny that such a thing exists. The atmosphere of High Firs on the following morning was most pronounced in character. Suppressed excite-

ment, nervousness, and suspense were all-pervading. Miss Lucas had not appeared either at dinner on the previous night or at breakfast this morning. And breakfast in particular had been a meal characterised by long silences and spasmodic attempts at conversation.

Immediately after breakfast Miss Chester, pale and nervous, had gone out into the garden, and Ralph Ireland had shortly afterwards disappeared in the same direction. Mrs. Ray, forced to expend her obvious agitation on domestic details, had been in the act of retreating to the kitchen premises when she heard Colonel Thurstan, speaking almost for the first time that morning, ask her husband to come with him for a few moments into the library.

The traces of a sleepless night were very evident on Colonel Thurstan's face as he and his host stood face to face a few minutes later by the library fire. He made no pause or prelude but came directly to the point.

"Ray," he said, "I must go away at once. There's a train at two-fifty. Can you send me in to it?"

Stafford Ray paused a minute. He was looking steadily at the fire.

"Yes," he said in a low voice, "anything you please, Thurstan, of course."

"You will make my excuses to your wife," the other went on. "I can't say too emphatically that my own private affairs, only, take me away."

There was a moment's silence, and then Stafford Ray said:

"You feel that you must go?"

A faint dull colour mounted to Colonel Thurstan's forehead, and he glanced for the first time at his host's averted face.

"You have understood, then?" he said quietly. "Yes, I suppose it was inevitable."

"Must you go?" repeated Stafford Ray in the same low tone.

Colonel Thurstan moved abruptly, and walked to the window.

"What else can I do?" he said, and the words came from between set teeth. "The sight of me will be hateful to her. I can't spare her anything except my presence."

There was another silence and then Stafford Ray moved.

"It's for you to decide," he said. "The dog-cart shall be ready for you at two o'clock; only, is it wise to take things for granted?"

He did not wait for an answer, and Colonel Thurstan offered none. The door

had closed behind his host before he turned. He crossed the room and sat down at the writing-table, but he made no attempt to occupy himself. He rested his elbows on the table, and let his forehead fall forward on his clenched hands. The moments passed, and still he did not stir. Half an hour, three quarters, one hour had gone by, and then a touch upon the handle of the door made him start violently. He moved, making an obvious effort to draw his features into an expression less haggard and grief-stricken. Then the door opened, and he rose suddenly to his feet, his face drawn and white, as Miss Lucas came into the room. She shut the door, and came slowly towards him.

Barely eighteen hours had passed since she had confronted him so disdainfully in the drawing-room, on the previous afternoon, but time had no share in the change that those hours had wrought in her. Her blue eyes were sunken, and there was no colour even in her lips. There were strange new lines about her mouth, and resolutely as her lips were set their steadiness seemed to be temporary only. Dignity was as innate in her as was her womanly grace, but at that moment the proud self-control of her manner and bearing only enhanced the utter humiliation with which her whole personality seemed in some indescribable way to be pervaded. She stood quite still before him, looking, not at him, but at the ground between them. Then she spoke.

"I haven't come to ask you to forgive me," she said. "No forgiveness could be wide enough to cover all the wrong I have done you. But I thought I should like you to know there are no words that can express my sense of my own injustice, or the depths of my self-contempt."

She stopped, catching her breath painfully, as he interposed quickly and huskily.

"Don't speak like that," he said, "Don't speak like that, for Heaven's sake, Anne!"

"It has taken a voice from the dead to convince me," she said. Her voice shook a little. "But not even the dead can undo the wrong I've done you. Not even the dead can undo the past. There's only one thing I should like to say. I told our story as I did, recklessly, not caring how I hurt myself, wishing to stir up the old fire of my passion against you, wishing to wound you, to humiliate you, to insult you. Will you forgive me for that only, out of

all the rest! For the sake of what it has brought about."

"If there is anything to forgive, you need not ask forgiveness of me, Anne," he said hoarsely. "You know it is yours without the asking."

She looked up at him for a moment, steadily. Then her eyes fell again.

"That's all, then," she said. "Good-bye, John."

Almost before he realised what she was doing, she had turned away and crossed the room. Her hand was actually on the door, when suddenly and for no apparent reason Stafford Ray's words flashed through Colonel Thurstan's brain. "Is it wise to take things for granted?" In another instant, he, too, had crossed the room and was standing close beside her.

"Not like this!" he cried. "After so many years, Anne; not like this!"

She paused, startled and uncertain, lifting her eyes to his face.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"You said that no forgiveness could cover up what is past," he returned rapidly. "Is there nothing else between us, Anne? Nothing that has survived through everything; in spite of everything; never to be crushed out? Anne, I love you. I love you now as I loved you eighteen years ago, as I shall love you till I die. If anything survives of what you could have given to me once, give it me now."

She had drawn back a step, and was facing him, her face dead-white against the dark oak of the door, her lips trembling.

"It is too late," she said; "we are too old. I was a girl then; now I am almost an old woman. We can be friends, John, perhaps—if you will; but the time for anything else is past. I have wasted it."

He had come nearer to her and was looking straight down into her face. His voice as he answered her was strong and tender, and insistent.

"We are boy and girl no longer," he said. "That is true. Many of the years we might have spent together lie behind us; that is true too. Then let us make the most of those that are still to come. Anne, Anne, you did love me, once! You told me so that night on the mountain; you have told me so, even when you have hated me most, in the telling of our story. Time and its cunning have

brought us together at last. Don't let it be in vain."

She did not take her eyes from his; his gaze seemed to hold her fascinated. She did not speak at once, and when her words came at last, they were a mere whisper.

"In spite of all?" she said, "in spite of all?"

"Because of all!" he answered. "For auld lang syne, Anne, give me what I have waited for these eighteen years."

The colour was coming and going in her cheeks, as though those eighteen years of which he spoke were all annihilated, and she were a girl again. She seemed to hesitate and waver, then suddenly she drew back and clasped her hands over her face.

"How can you want me?" she said. "How can you do anything but hate me, here in this house, where I treated you so badly!"

"Here, in this house, where we were boy and girl together!"

And there, where they had played together as children, he took her, unresisting, into his arms.

It was only for a moment, but in that moment the pain of eighteen years was cancelled, the broken hopes of youth were all made good. It was a moment too perfect even to be prolonged, and he made no effort to detain her when she released herself, trembling from head to foot, her eyes full of tears, her cheeks flushed, and rushed away from him out of the room. She went on across the hall with the same blind, headlong movement; and at the foot of the stairs she brushed against some one. Lifting her eyes with an incoherent word of apology, she saw that it was Mina Chester. With a low cry of overflowing love and happiness, she caught the girl impulsively in her arms.

"Her daughter!" she said. "Her daughter! And I might never have known!"

They stood for a second or two, almost motionless. Mina had thrown her arms round the elder woman with a quick, clinging pressure, laying her head on her shoulder, with a gesture which seemed to tell of a special longing for sympathy and tenderness. She, too, was trembling very much, and she did not lift her face even when Miss Lucas spoke again, in tender, shaken tones.

"You will be fond of me, won't you, Mina? I have never loved any woman

as I loved your mother. You will let me try to make you happy. You——"

She had taken one of the girl's hands in hers, and was carrying it in quick impulsive fashion to her cheek, when she suddenly stopped short. Every vestige of colour died slowly out of her face; her eyes, dilated, transfixed in expression, were fastened on the long white fingers that she held. It was Mina's left hand, and on the third finger there was a ring. It was a man's seal ring; a sapphire, curiously set in old gold.

"Where did you get that?"

The words came from her slowly, hoarsely, and with long pauses between. Startled by her tone the girl lifted her head suddenly; her face was tremulous and flushed. But her own words seemed to have broken the spell that held Miss Lucas, and she went on rapidly:

"He didn't give it to your mother; it was on his finger when I saw him last. Oh, Gervase! Child, child, who gave it to you? Where did you get it? Tell me!"

She looked from the ring to Mina's face. She was still holding the hand on which it rested, and the girl, half frightened, confused, and tremulous, answered:

"The ring? He has just given it to me. He wants me to wear it until—until he gets me another. Mr. Ireland, I mean. He says—I have promised——"

But the shy, faltering confession was not finished.

"Mr. Ireland?" interposed Miss Lucas almost wildly. "Where did he get it, then? Where is he?"

"It was his friend's," said Mina. "The friend he told us of the other night."

A cry broke from Miss Lucas, and at the same moment the library door opened, and with swift, uncertain steps she crossed the hall to Colonel Thurstan as he stood upon the threshold.

"Gervase!" she said. "Ah, John—John, Gervase at last—at last!"

CHAPTER XIII. FOR AULD LANG SYNE.

"BUT what I didn't understand at all," said Mrs. Ray, "was that it all happened in this house. I guessed at once—didn't I, Stafford?—that the Lucy of Miss Lucas's story was Miss Lucas herself, and that James was Colonel Thurstan. Of course"—Mrs. Ray's eager tone became subdued—"we none of us thought, until Miss Lucas recognised the ring, that Mr. Ireland's friend was her brother Geoffrey—Gervase his

name was really, I know—though I quite realised, when Miss Chester told her story, that her mother was Netta Strangeways. But it simply never entered my head that High Firs was the house."

They were sitting round the fire in the drawing-room, the same group that had sat there night after night for nearly a fortnight; the same group, but so different. They were all there; Colonel Thurstan and Miss Lucas, Mina Chester and Ralph Ireland, Mrs. Ray and her husband. But all the constraint, the atmosphere of antagonism and reserve that had pervaded the party ever since it came together, had wholly disappeared. On every face, differing though they might in everything else, there rested the same indefinable brightness; touched, in Miss Lucas and Colonel Thurstan, with the peace and rest of a long-lived sorrow healed at last; deepening and glowing in Mina Chester and Ralph Ireland with the unquestioning happiness and radiance of first love; resting on the host as calm satisfaction; and on the hostess as freedom from unendurable care.

A little silence, the silence of absolute contentment, had preceded Mrs. Ray's remark, and it was followed by a moment's pause. Then Colonel Thurstan glanced across at Stafford Ray, and said:

"You knew it, Ray?"

Stafford Ray made a slight gesture of assent.

"Yes," he said, "I hardly know how; but I did know from the first. I think it was partly Miss Lucas's likeness to the picture in the hall that helped me. I felt that she must be a Woodroffe, and I only wondered whether she had assumed the name of Lucas when she came here. And then once on the scent, I recognised the rooms as you told your stories, and I recognised the country round."

"How angry I was with you for helping me out of that difficulty about the portrait," said Miss Lucas softly to Colonel Thurstan.

Then she turned impulsively to Mrs. Ray.

"It wasn't quite fair, perhaps," she said, "but you do understand now, don't you, that I didn't change my name on purpose. I was Anne Woodroffe till five years ago, then I had to change my name because of some money that was left to me."

"The old place has been waiting for its rightful owners for a long time," said

Stafford Ray. "I am glad they are to come back to it, at last."

Nobody but herself knew what gladness had been brought to Mrs. Ray's heart by the brief conversation that had taken place between Colonel Thurstan and her husband a few hours earlier with reference to the transfer of High Firs. Colonel Thurstan and Miss Lucas desired to buy the place back, and the sum which they proposed to pay for it would relieve Mrs. Ray's life of its one unendurable burden: the spectre of the possible necessity for a return to town life for her husband. She was very tenderhearted in her own great happiness, and her eyes filled with tears as Miss Lucas said in a low voice:

"Its rightful owner will never come back to it."

The words were succeeded by a short silence. Perhaps every one who heard them was thinking more or less pitifully of the man to whom they referred—the Gervase Woodroffe from whose hands High Firs had passed to strangers; the hero of that drama of blighted hopes and ruined prospects that had played itself out under that roof so many years before; of whose life they had heard from his sister's lips; of whose death they had heard, as she herself had heard, from the lips of a stranger. Of the identity of Gervase Woodroffe with the "George" of Ralph Ireland's story, there was no doubt. The ring itself, which now sparkled on Miss Lucas's hand; the ring bearing the Woodroffe crest, and engraved inside with the initials G. W.; was proof enough for her; and all the additional description that the young man had eagerly given had gone to confirm the evidence of that mute witness. Gervase Woodroffe was dead. If he had lived useless and idle for the sake of the one woman he had loved, he had died strong and self-sacrificing for the womanliness which that love had rendered sacred to him.

It was Ralph Ireland who broke the silence.

"And after all," he said, "if it hadn't

been for Mrs. Ray's advertisement, all this would never have come about."

He spoke with rather forced cheerfulness, evidently with the kindly intention of leading away from the sadder topic on which they had fallen, and Stafford Ray seconded him instantly.

He turned to his wife with a twinkle in his eyes as he answered the young man.

"The advertisement!" he said; "was it the advertisement, Kitty, do you think? or was it the old house and the memories that hang about it? Miss Lucas, was it the advertisement that tempted you, or had you any private reason for coming?"

Miss Lucas smiled.

"I came because the old house drew me," she said. "Mrs. Ray will forgive me for that, because, you see, I didn't know her then."

"And why did you come, Thurstan?" continued Stafford Ray.

"For the sake of old times."

Stafford Ray's eyes moved on to Ralph Ireland, and the young man answered their half-laughing question.

"I came," he said in a low, rather shamefaced tone, "because I knew that this was George's county, and I wanted to know it."

Stafford Ray's eyes were not laughing any longer. They were very gentle as he turned them on Mina Chester.

"My mother loved High Firs," she said softly. "She loved it till she died, for the sake of what came to her and what she left under its roof. I came here for her sake."

"For auld lang syne, first and last," said Stafford Ray. "Kitty, your advertisement hasn't a chance!"

There were tears in Mrs. Ray's eyes, and a quiver in her voice, though she was laughing too, as she said stoutly:

"You may say what you like, Stafford, but I shall always maintain that it was the advertisement that gave auld lang syne its chance."

ADVERTISEMENT DEPARTMENT.

For particulars respecting Advertisement Spaces, address THE ADVERTISING MANAGER of "All the Year Round," No. 168, Fleet Street, London, E.C.

HOME NOTES

AND

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS.

JAPANESE PECULIARITIES.—Mr. Savage Landor says: "Among our own ladies, the custom of 'painting' themselves is not uncommon, but it is not practised by most sensible women; in Japan it forms part of the ordinary woman's daily toilette. Many a wicked story is current in Japan of comical mistakes made by Japanese ladies in misplacing the different items of wearing apparel. The story goes of a certain marchioness who, having ordered a dress and underclothing in Paris, wrote to the milliner requesting her to pack the different articles in the order in which they were to be worn. The case reached its destination in safety, but was unfortunately opened at the wrong end, and the noble lady was seen at a garden party wearing her chemise, which she had put on the top of everything else, as a sort of mantilla, as it was the last thing she found at the bottom of the case! I myself have seen, with my own eyes, a lady, occupying one of the highest positions in Tokyo, nearly suffocated through having put on her corset the wrong way up! It is an everyday occurrence, especially in the streets of Tokyo, to see men wearing European boots and a bowler hat, while the rest of the body is only clad in what we generally use as underclothing; yet those men think themselves dressed just like Europeans.

CAULIFLOWER IN CREAM.—Prepare as above, but only boil half an hour. Drain off the water and simmer half an hour longer in one pint each of milk and hot water, with two teaspoonfuls of salt. Take it up tenderly with a skimmer, and serve with a cream sauce made as follows:—Put a pint of cream in a double boiler, and let it just come to a boil. Have ready a tablespoonful of flour in which you have put salt and white pepper to taste. Reserve enough of the cream (a little over half a cupful) to mix this smooth, then stir into the boiling cream. Let it boil two or three minutes, and serve with the cauliflower. This is a nice sauce for nearly every kind of vegetable, and also for fish.

CELERY SAUCE FOR TURKEY.—Boil a head of celery until quite tender, then put it through a sieve, put the yolk of an egg in a basin, and beat it well with the strained juice of a lemon, add the celery, and a couple of spoonfuls of liquor in which the turkey was boiled; salt and pepper to taste.

SMOOTH FACES.—There would be fewer wrinkles on the human face if one would only correct oneself of the bad habit of knitting the brows, which plant indelibly certain little lines between the eyebrows. Raising the eyebrows apropos of nothing and everything is a habit for which one pays with long horizontal lines across the forehead, which ages a person at least ten years; an artificial stereotyped smile prints two long lines from the nose to the corners of the mouth. To remain late at night poring over novels digs around the eyes those terrible crow's-feet which disfigure the prettiest face. Those who laugh much have small wrinkles on the cheek and around the mouth, which are often thought not unpleasant; and we must not interfere with these, for gayness is a virtue to be cultivated, and not avoided.

HOME SHOPPING.—It is most advantageous to know just where to find such fabrics as are moderate in price, fashionable, and durable, these being qualities which all shopkeepers claim for their goods, but which, in reality, few textures possess, simply because the average tradesman is bent upon securing such enormous profits. Hence the reason why so many ladies are conducting their shopping from home, thereby saving themselves trouble, annoyance, and subsequent disappointment; for how many shops one may enter before finding exactly the required article or fabric, and how often one is talked and persuaded into buying a totally different article to that fixed upon. Whereas, in shopping by post, one receives the patterns, making a leisurely selection, after having well studied and examined the fabric chosen.

A MISUNDERSTANDING.—At a dinner party there were two sisters present, one a widow who had just emerged from her weeds, the other not long married, whose husband had lately gone out to India for a short term. A young barrister present was deputed to take the widow down to dinner. Unfortunately he was under the impression that his partner was the married lady whose husband had just arrived in India. The conversation between them commenced by the lady's remarking how extremely hot it was. "Yes, it is very hot," replied the young barrister. Then a happy thought suggested itself to him, and he added with a cheerful smile, "But not so hot as the place to which your husband has gone." The look with which the widow answered this "happy thought" will haunt that young barrister till the day of his death.

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

HOW TO TOAST MUFFINS.—The proper way to toast muffins is first of all, with either a fork or your finger and thumb, break the muffin all round the sides, then toast the muffin until the outsides are nice and crisp, but they should not be hard. Divide the muffin carefully with two forks, never cut it with a knife; then either pour some warm butter over it, or place here and there on either half some pieces of butter; it should never be spread. Place on a hot plate, and divide in four, and serve very hot. So often muffins are not cooked enough and are made heavy by being cut.

WOMEN RATE-COLLECTORS.—At a recent special meeting of the Bermondsey Guardians for the purpose of appointing two rate-collectors, the claims of eight out of sixty-three applicants were submitted. One of the two finally chosen was Mrs. Holland, the widow of a rate-collector who died in October. The district held by the late collector was divided into two, and the salaries were fixed at two hundred and ten pounds, rising to two hundred and fifty pounds, each collector. Mrs. Holland's election gave rise to an exciting division.

DEATH OF RUBINSTEIN.—Anton Rubinstein, the famous musician, died at Peterhof, near St. Petersburg, on the 20th ultimo, of heart disease. The great pianist and composer was sixty-five years of age, having been born in Volhynia, near the Russo-Austrian frontier, on the 30th November, 1829. When seven years of age he began to receive regular tuition in music at Moscow, and before he was thirteen he undertook his first grand artistic tour, during which he visited London and many of the principal towns in England. As a pianist he was in the very first rank, and as a composer he was one of the most gifted of the younger generations.

CHAPPED LIPS AND HANDS.—A good emollient for chapped hands and lips is prepared as follows:—Dissolve half an ounce of beeswax in half an ounce of sweet oil. It will readily dissolve if placed in an old cup or saucer just inside a cool oven or at the side of the fire. When dissolved add a few drops of rose-water or any preferred scent. Stir all the time till quite cold, or the ingredients will separate again while cooling. Use as often as required. This preparation is perfectly harmless, effectual, and, at the same time, inexpensive. When the lips or hands are badly chapped it should be applied several times during the day.

THE CREEPER PAR EXCELLENCE for a London or town garden, where a screen is required, or an ugly fence or wall to be hidden, is, however, the wild clematis, traveller's joy, or maiden's bower (*C. vitalba*). Once planted, this grows like a weed anywhere, and clothes all within its reach with a close rich mantle of dark glossy green. The fluffy greenish white blossoms are also often produced quite freely, and form an additional attraction.

VERONICAS.—In the shrubby veronicas we have yet another delightful class of autumn-flowering plants, and very nearly hardy ones, too. I am reminded of them by having just cut a handful of sprays from a fine plant of the ordinary *V. Andersoni*, each with its wealth of glossy foliage, and two or more compact spikes of soft violet purple blossoms. The plant is in a cool greenhouse, where it will remain in bloom until nearly or quite Christmas, but it does well in a sheltered garden, or in a warm climate, in the open air, while it also makes an excellent window-plant. The culture is most simple, the plants growing, either in pots or planted out, as freely as a euonymus, all that is necessary being to protect them in some way from severe frost. *V. decussata* has much smaller, box-like foliage, also with blue flowers; *V. Blue Gem* is very dwarf and compact, and almost always in bloom, and there are several other forms. *V. Traversi* is a hardy shrub from New Zealand, becoming in the summer a perfect cloud of pretty white blossoms.

ROAST TURKEY.—If the turkey be a young one, the legs will be smooth and black; if recently killed, the eyes will be full and bright. It is very essential to wipe the inside scrupulously clean. Reserve the liver and gizzard to skewer into the wings, and boil the remaining giblets for gravy. While roasting, be sure to keep basting the bird. Seasoning: This usually consists of sausages mixed with breadcrumbs and an egg, while some prefer oyster, veal, or chestnut and bacon stuffing. The turkey should be served with bread-sauce, and good brown gravy, and the dish should be garnished with sausages.

BOILED CAULIFLOWER.—Wash and trim and lay in weak salt and water to draw out any insects that may have found refuge within it; then put in a bag made of net and into boiling well-salted water. Let boil an hour, drain it, keeping it hot and whole; pour over it a drawn butter sauce and send to the table, where it should be cut up with a silver knife.

CURE OF OBESITY.—Mr. F. C. Russell, of Woburn House, Store Street, Bedford Square, London, W.C., has long been famous for his remedy for the cure of obesity. Those who suffer from this difficulty will, by sending 4d. to the above address, receive Mr. Russell's pamphlet, containing testimonials from a great number of persons who have been benefited by the treatment, as well as a recipe for it. It matters not what be the weather or season, those who are troubled suffer equally in hot weather and in cold; in summer they are overburdened by their own weight, in winter bronchial ailments are set up through the least cold, as the air tubes are not free to act, as they would otherwise do without the obstruction. Mr. Russell undertakes that persons under his treatment should lose one stone a month in weight, and that their health, strength, and activity should be regenerated.

The following are extracts from other journals :

A POSITIVE REMEDY FOR CORPULENCE.—Any remedy that can be suggested as a cure or alleviation for stoutness will be heartily welcomed. We have recently received a well-written book, the author of which seems to know what he is talking about. It is entitled "Corpulency and the Cure" (256 pages), and is a cheap issue (only 4d.), published by Mr. F. C. Russell, of Woburn House, 27, Store Street, Bedford Square, London, W.C. Our space will not do justice to this book; send for it yourself. It appears that Mr. Russell has submitted all kinds of proofs to the English Press. The editor of "The Tablet," the Catholic organ, writes: "Mr. Russell does not give us the slightest loophole for a doubt as to the value of his cure, for in the most straightforward and matter-of-fact manner he submitted some hundreds of original and unsolicited testimonial letters for our perusal, and offered us plenty more if required. To assist him to make this remedy known, we think we cannot do better than publish quotations from some of the letters submitted. The first one, a marchioness, writes from Madrid:—'My son, Count —, has reduced his weight in twenty-two days 16 kilos — i.e., 34 lbs.' Another writes:—'So far (six weeks from the commencement of following your system) I have lost fully two stone in weight.' The next (a lady) writes:—'I am just half the size.' A

fourth:—'I find it is successful in my case. I have lost 8 lbs. in weight since I commenced (two weeks).' Another writes:—'A reduction of 18 lbs. in a month is a great success.' A lady from Bournemouth writes:—'I feel much better, have less difficulty in breathing, and can walk about.' Again, a lady says:—'It reduced me considerably, not only in the body, but all over.' The author is very positive. He says:—"Step on a weighing machine on Monday morning and again on Tuesday, and I guarantee that you have lost 2 lbs. in weight without the slightest harm, and vast improvement in health through ridding the system of unhealthy accumulations."—"Cork Herald."

CURE FOR OBESITY AT LAST.—Now Monsieur Pasteur and great Mr. Koch, and all other "made in Germany" cures, look well to your laurels. We have now an Englishman who has discovered a real remedy for corpulence. The proof of this is demonstrated by a person stepping on a weighing-machine in twenty-four hours after commencing his treatment. Not so with your "dog-bite" business, M. Pasteur, and not so with your bacillic exterminator, Mr. Koch. The results of your investigations are comparatively cloudy. Who knows whether a person, for instance, would have died from hydrophobia, and how is it that the inoculation is admitted to fail on many occasions? Simply because the "cure" is not perfect. Now let all fat persons read "Corpulency and the Cure" (256 pages), published by F. C. Russell, our British Specialist, of Woburn House, 27, Store Street, Bedford Square, London, W.C., price only 4d., but worth twenty times as much. There you will find that an English chemist can remove 14 lbs. of superfluous fat and waste from the system in seven days with herbs which you can gather in our British meadows. He has likewise shown the Continental theorists that their doctrines are untenable when they say that to reduce fat one must eat and drink less. The wind is completely out of their sails, for patients under Mr. Russell's treatment become more healthy, and their appetite improves immediately after the removal of the first 2 lbs. of unhealthy accumulation, and this happens in about twenty-four hours. Send for this book. We have just had it brought under our notice; it is well worth reading. — "Dover Express."

ALL THE YEAR ROUND:

THERE are many so-called Hair Restorers, but amongst them are many that are absolutely injurious to the head, in consequence of the dangerous ingredients they contain. "Eau Horn" we can vouch for as being really beneficial in cases of Premature Baldness, and for persons with thin hair, as if used according to the directions, it will cause the hair to grow, will keep the scalp free from scurf, and impart a rich, glossy appearance to the hair. Doctor Horn's "Acesma" is also exceedingly good for restoring grey or faded hair, and is specially recommended for ladies' long hair. We may also mention his Skin Food for the complexion, which will cure wrinkles and crow's-feet, and if applied every night will cure all roughness, irritation, etc., of the skin. We strongly advise you to read Doctor Horn's book, "The Human Hair, Its Treatment in Health and Disease," which can be obtained—as well as the above—from Doctor Horn, Newport, Isle of Wight, or from Cassie and Company, 49, Newgate Street, E.C., post free for six stamps.

PERFUMES.—Those who wish to give a Christmas or New Year's present that is sure to be appreciated, cannot do better than purchase one of Messrs. Rimmel's boxes of new perfume. Each box contains three bottles, and invariably three of the choicest scents to be met with. The house of Rimmel certainly stands at the top of the tree for choice perfumes. Any of their establishments will supply you by either writing or calling at 96, Strand, 64, Cheapside, or 180, Regent Street, London.

WE have seen many Dress Shields, but certainly none will compare with Kleinert's Invincible Seamless Stockinet Dress Shield, which is not only waterproof but soft and odourless. They absorb all moisture freely and dry quickly; can be easily washed, and will retain their shape. The proprietors of Kleinert's Invincible Shields warrant them to give entire satisfaction, and will not only refund the money if this is not so, but will hold themselves responsible for any damage to dress. They are to be obtained at all drapers' and ladies' outfitters'.

THOSE who value a clear complexion, with soft, smooth skin, free from unsightly pimples, blotches, etc., cannot do better than try Cullwick's Blood Tablets, which are far better than many so-called complexion washes, etc., and for eczema and skin eruptions you should try Cullwick's Skin Ointment. Both are sold by all chemists, or by Martin, Chemist, of Southampton.

BEETHAM'S Fragrant Rose Leaf Powder is a deliciously scented powder for the skin, and should be on every lady's dressing-table, and if used in conjunction with Beetham's Glycerine and Cucumber, there is very little that is required to make the skin soft and velvety. Both these can be obtained from all chemists, or direct from M. Beetham and Son, Chemists, Cheltenham.

A BOON TO DRESSMAKERS.—Prym's patent reform hooks and eyes may really be termed a boon to dressmakers, so much trouble and time do they save in finishing off a bodice. The following are a few of the advantages of using them. Firstly, they can be accurately and easily sewn on by the most inexperienced person. Secondly, Prym's hooks and eyes, when sewn on regularly, as indicated in the illustrated diagram which accompanies them, close the opening the whole length, thus obviating all unsightly gaping-open. Thirdly, the hook is quite a different and superior patent to anything yet seen, having a small raised piece, which keeps them from opening by themselves; and, fourthly, these hooks are not in the least injured through washing and ironing.

JELLIES.—These are one of the indispensable additions to the Christmas fare, and really contribute quite as much to the appearance of the table as to the palate, as a rule. But Messrs. Chivers are the exception to this rule, for their famous gold medal jellies are truly delicious, besides being economical. They are flavoured all ready for use, and though many may think the addition of a little brandy or sherry an improvement, we think them equally good without any addition whatever beyond the necessary amount of water required to dissolve them. Housewives who once test these jellies will never use any other again. All grocers keep them. They are sold in pint quantities at fourpence halfpenny, or quarts, eightpence. If not obtainable at the nearest grocer's, a half-pint sample packet will be sent for twopence halfpenny direct from S. Chivers and Sons, Histon, Cambridge.

BOILED TURKEY.—Prepare the turkey as for roasting; wipe it dry, and rub with pepper and salt. Make a stuffing of moistened breadcrumbs, and butter, pepper, salt, and thyme—quantity of each according to taste. Fill the crop and body of the bird with this, and sew up securely. Boil the bird for two or three hours, according to its size and age, and serve with celery or oyster sauces, or melted butter.

ADVERTISEMENTS.

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Bilious & Nervous Disorders,
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In Boxes, 9½d., 1s. 1½d., and 2s. 9d. each, with full directions.

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This valuable Food contains as much nutriment as meat.

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 MOST EASILY DIGESTED.

Sold in Tins, 1s. per lb., by all Grocers and Chemists.

MANUFACTORY:

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EXQUISITE MODELS.

PERFECT FIT.

GUARANTEED WEAR.



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DIAGONAL SEAM CORSETS.

Patented in England and on the Continent.
 Will not split in the Seams nor
 tear in the Fabric.

Made in White, Black, and all
 the fashionable colours and shades
 in Italian Cloth, Satin, and Coutil.
 Also in the New Sanitary Woollen
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PER PAIR, AND UPWARDS.

Three Gold Medals.

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Has for over HALF A CENTURY sustained its HIGH
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Eugene Rimmel (Limited) call
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 collection of

XMAS & NEW YEAR'S GOODS.

Sold Everywhere.

CAUTION.—Note Name and Trade Mark on all Goods.

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Ask your Grocer for

Crosse & Blackwell's FRESH FRUIT JAMS & JELLIES,

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CROSSE & BLACKWELL, LIMITED.

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**THE WONDERFUL AT 2/A YARD.
VELVETEEN**

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Black and all the most beautiful Colours now worn, Fast Pile, Fast Dyed, Every inch guaranteed. "The Finest ever shown—thoroughly durable." If a Dress should wear badly or be in any respect faulty! LEWIS'S will GIVE a NEW DRESS for nothing at all, and Pay the full cost for Making and Trimming. This quality is sold by the best Drapers at 3/6, 4/6, and 5/6 a yard, but Lewis's manufacture this Velveteen themselves, and sell it direct to the public at 2/- a yard Carriage Paid on All Orders.

Can only be obtained direct from LEWIS'S, in Market Street, Manchester.

Ladies are asked to write on an ordinary post-card for PATTERNS, POST FREE.

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See that every yard is stamped with the Trade Mark containing fac-simile of Lewis's signature.

DRESS MATERIALS WONDERFUL in Value, Style, Beauty, and Variety. Ladies, write for the New Patterns. Please mention "All the Year Round" and address—

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